

If you gave up sweets for Lent, you are probably ready to bite the ear off the nearest chocolate Easter bunny. Some people take Lent easier than others do. A friend of mine once gave up watermelon for Lent – not a big challenge in the month of March.

Most Catholics use Lent for self-denial. We do without some things that are essentially good for us – like meat or chocolate – so that we can enjoy them more when Easter arrives. Or we do without some unhealthy things that we should be doing without anyway – from soft drinks to tobacco to pornography. You may have changed some habits that should be changed period. If you've made a real commitment to Lent, life will be different for you at Easter.

All commitments include self-denial. If you are married, you forsake all others. You deny yourself some pleasures your partner doesn't enjoy. If *one* of you likes travel, one of you likes baseball, one of you wants more children, one of you wants shorter grass in the front yard, but the other doesn't, one of you gives in. You give up some pleasures because it is more pleasurable to please the one you love. Lent is not the only time we practice self-denial.

Baptism is our commitment to Christ. To be baptized is to practice self-denial. We pledge to avoid the tempting sins that keep us from Christ. We live for Christ, not for ourselves.

Christians experience moments of doubt, like everyone else. We're not supposed to, but we do. When tragedy strikes our nation, we wonder where God is. When someone dies unexpectedly, we wonder why God wasn't there. During a serious illness, we wonder why me? Baptism cleanses from sin, but we are still prone to sin. Baptism confirms our faith, but we are still prone to doubts.

Doubts trouble the best of commitments. One partner wonders if the relationship really is strong, or why at least on certain days, you don't seem to like the people you're supposed to love. It is then, in the face of doubt, that we learn what commitment is.

St. Paul compared baptism to death. Death denies us the life we know; baptism denies us the sin we know. Death leads to new life; baptism leads to new grace. Paul says, "We were indeed buried with Christ Jesus through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life." Christ died to sin once and for all, and now he lives for God. We too must think of ourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.

A lot of people think self-denial brings sadness and self-indulgence brings happiness. It's not that simple. Self-denial can bring more satisfaction than self-indulgence when it flows from our commitments.

This Easter let us put to death whatever keeps us from our commitments and rejoice in the life that comes from Christ.

Here are 2 stories, each involving a criminal. Within our parish boundaries I am baptizing 8 people this Easter. Seven of them came to the Vigil last night, but the 8th is an inmate at a local prison. I will baptize him this coming week. He has prepared for nearly a year and has declared his desire for Christ. On Good Friday afternoon I received a call from a hospital in St. Joseph with tragic news: the father of this inmate had just died in the emergency room. The family was hoping the prison would allow a small delegation, including me, to go there and tell the inmate this news in person. Well, the prison has its rules, and after several requests, the prison said no. Instead, they set up a phone call, so the inmate could hear the news from a family member, and I will visit with him in the prison during one of our regularly scheduled meetings tonight. I do not fault the prison staff for this; they are following rules set in place to protect us from criminals and to make crimes look less appealing. But you can see one way our prison systems respond to our country's desire to punish those who commit crimes.

The second story happened [next door] in St. Rita's [in Cameron]. One afternoon this winter in broad daylight someone let himself into the locked building and stole a video projector. With the help of our Secretary-Detective Tammy Mallen and the Cameron Police Department, 48 hours later the perpetrator was apprehended, and the stolen property, which had already been fenced in Kansas City, was back in my hands, good as new. The thief has been sentenced to 5 years. Last week my doorbell rang. A member of the thief's family had come to apologize.

When crimes happen, punishment should follow, but punishment doesn't have to get in the way of forgiveness. We are not a forgiving society, but we might be better off if we were. We might rely less on vengeance and more on justice. Justice should achieve harmony, not bitterness. Justice should lift people up, not kick them down.

This is Easter. Christ is risen. He died so that we might live in peace with one another. Paul says to the recently baptized Colossians, "If you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth." Christ has won the victory over death. Now we wage the skirmishes of life. When we seek peace,

forgiveness, harmony, and respect, we seek the things that are above. Our minds will be raised with Christ.