

When you have love it's easy to be unselfish. In this parish it's often very obvious how caring people are. We pass the basket; you offer assistance. We ask for food; you bring it in. We need volunteers; you're here. But often love is not very public at all. For example, we have several households in the parish right now where an elderly or sick person lives at home and needs special care. Family members are responding with their time and attention -- unsung heroes. Because they have love they deprive themselves of sleep, food, comfort, and freedom. They do it willingly, gladly, compassionately, because their love acts as a fuel for their lives. Now, if I were to ask you to give that kind of care for someone you don't know, or who has offended you, or who belongs to a different class or race -- the same actions might become more difficult to do. It is love which makes charitable actions easy.

During lent we deprive ourselves of some comforts. We may eat less, drink less, smoke less, watch tv less, gamble less -- we do the kind of actions that people do out of love for someone else. The church asks us very little during lent. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of fast and abstinence. On a fast day we eat only one full meal and two partial meals, no snacking in between. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days that call for that kind of fast; it's also recommended for Holy Saturday. Fasting applies to you from the day after your 18th birthday up to and including your 59th birthday. If you were born on or before April 1, 1940 you won't have to fast on Good Friday this year; you may eat three full meals, and think about the rest of us. But the law of abstinence binds everyone after age 14 -- no upper limit. We abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and on all the Fridays of lent. If you are a guest on a Friday when your host serves meat, you consider yourselves excused. There is also an exception when a major feast falls on a Friday, which happens this year to St. Joseph; so on March 19, you may have that hotdog if you want. Many Catholics accept fast and abstinence begrudgingly, but the goal is to accept our lenten penance in the same spirit that motivates us spontaneously to do without some things for people we love. It's love which gives us the fuel to power ourselves through lent.

In the second letter of Paul to Timothy, today's second reading, we hear that God has saved us and called us to life and immortality. God does this out of love and sustains us in love. If we rely on that power of God, we can respond to Paul's crazy-sounding invitation, "Join with me in suffering for the gospel." Glad to do it. It's relatively easy to suffer when we do it out of love.

Although the church asks us to observe these few laws on fast and abstinence, it encourages us to do more voluntarily. Whatever you do, let it start from love and produce love. If by spending less on some pleasures this season you come out a few dollars ahead, give it to charity. If you come out a few hours ahead, give the time to the needy. Most of us know lent as a season of penance, but it is even more a season of love.