

There's an old joke they tell about a priest who was walking down the street with some friends from his parish. As they rounded a corner a beautiful woman walked by and the priest turned his head to get a better look. One of the parishioners was surprised and said, "Hey, Father, I thought priests couldn't get married." And the priest responded, "Just because you're on a diet doesn't mean you can't look at the menu."

If Catholic priests, nuns, and brothers are famous for anything, it's for being single, or celibate, as we say in the trade. And Celibacy is an example of what Lent is famous for--self-denial, giving up something. This is an old Catholic practice.

Jesus had walked into the desert, giving up food, drink, and human contact. If he could do that surely we could, too. When I was a kid we didn't have deserts, so we gave up candy, we gave up movies. There were some things we would gladly have given up but we weren't supposed to--brussels sprouts and homework, for example. At its best, giving up things built character; it helped us conquer our desires. At its worst it made us angry, deceitful, and insincere. But giving up things has been a hallmark of Lent ever since Jesus walked into the desert.

Now, in the popular culture, apart from religion, giving up things is catching on. In fact, America is becoming so health-conscious that self-denial has become chic. If you haven't given up smoking yet, people tell you to do so in a thousand ways every day. If you want to lose weight and improve your figure, you join a health club. Most people are surprised that joining doesn't do it; you have to work at it after you join. Recovering alcoholics give up the bottle in order to find a new life. People abstain from having more children, they abstain from nights out, they abstain from television. They say 4% of the American population watches no television. I'm sure the celibate population is even less, but tell people you don't watch TV and they look at you like you're some kind of an alien. But, on the whole, giving up things has become acceptable.

The point about Lent is this: Giving up things is well and good, as long as it brings a positive result. We don't give up things for our own sakes, we give up things for the betterment of others. We give up a night out so we can be with the family. We give up junk food so we can feel better and work better. This is the spirit of Jesus' journey to the desert: He lived without us for a while, so he could return to us with all his heart.

Many people, instead of giving something up, do something extra for Lent, and this is also just fine. The point is we want positive results come Easter. Lent should bring balance, not irritation. We're not just burying them for 40 days, we're changing them for life. Where is the turmoil in your life? Do something this Lent to end it. Are you lazy? Then work harder. Do you work too hard? Then play more. But whatever we do, we do for others, even if we do it alone.

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