

Sunday, February 7, 2016
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

LENT

Lent begins this coming Wednesday, February 10. It is about as early as it can possibly start, since Easter occurs just after the beginning of Spring this year on March 27. Lent is one of the Church's most sacred seasons, a time of reform and repentance. Most Catholics understand this and treat Lent in a special way, entirely giving up or at least sacrificing something. Yet despite this traditional emphasis, Lent is not a negative season. It is a time of grace. Making positive changes in attitude and conduct, therefore, might be a better approach to Lent. Denying or giving up rarely produces long-term effects. Indeed, many Lenten practices end as soon as the season concludes.

The best way to change habits is to substitute new ones. Lent is an ideal opportunity to do this. For example, giving up computer games or TV isn't practical and ultimately is bound to fail. Instead, taking a walk or doing some other physical exercise is far more proactive and will automatically reduce the time available, and perhaps the desire, for passive entertainment. Likewise, reading is a good Lenten recommendation. It is a traditional spiritual practice conducive for reflection, thinking, and serenity. It also inspires and fosters learning.

The usual focus of many traditional Lenten practices is self-improvement. While this may be a laudable goal, it remains too narrow because it does not involve us in the wider concerns of life. Self-improvement is a result, not a goal. Lent, more properly then, should be a time of service to those in need or to charitable groups or organizations. Again, instead of giving up something, a person serious about Lent could volunteer to help at a soup kitchen, thrift store, parish office, school or other community group, initially volunteering on a substitute basis. The best way to improve ourselves is actually to help others.

We also improve our spiritual lives in the same indirect way. Jesus himself taught us that service is a basic premise of spiritual growth. For only if we take care of others, especially the sick, the homeless, the immigrant, the hungry, and the poor, can we be assured that we are doing what God expects of us. Charity is the only way to displace selfishness. Focusing on others, therefore, is the best Lenten practice.