

A bishop's guide to Lenten observance

Between my writing and your reading of this week's *Along the Way*, will come Ash Wednesday. I am happy about that.

I like Ash Wednesday. I always have. When we were kids, the day had a special attraction to it — an almost a mystical quality. I think it was because the season of Lent, begun on that day, asked something special of us in preparation for the Easter feast.

My parents and catechists who taught us encouraged us to pray a little more and with whatever extra fervor we could muster. They instructed us to be mindful of those in need and to help them, if we could. And they suggested with gentle persuasion that it would not hurt us a bit — in fact, it might even help — if we gave up something we really enjoyed for that 40-day period.

You might — at least, if you are of a certain age — guess some of the ways in which we kids responded to the leadership of those who cared so much about us and our spiritual growth.

We often chose the Friday afternoon Stations of the Cross throughout Lent as one special way of prayer. There was a sense of satisfaction about the rhythms and content of that devotion. There was also an accompanying sense of solidarity and belonging. Lots of people were there, including large numbers of us who went directly from school to the Stations on those Fridays. If any of us altar servers were assigned to assist, that made the day even more memorable.

Some years, I recall, some of us also went to Mass each day during Lent. Although our numbers were smaller than at the Stations of the Cross, many did strive to be there each morning. I know some who have continued that practice throughout their lifetimes.

We responded to the second counsel of our mentors — to be mindful of those in need and try to help them — by small deposits in what was in our day called the poor box and by giving to

along the way



BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

the collections at the Stations of the Cross. I am quite sure that we all did some other small extra things of that kind, but I cannot remember a specific one just now.

As much as we took seriously those two activities, the one we spent the most time thinking and talking about was the third element — willingly forgoing some pleasure for the duration of Lent. I don't think it was idle talk or thought, nor was it meant to be prideful or boastful. It was just our way of taking the whole thing seriously. I think it also was a way of supporting one another through what in a child's eyes seemed like endlessly long weeks.

That kind of planning yielded such practices as not eating dessert for the duration, or passing up the thrill of the week — Saturday matinee at the Lyric Theater — or observing the norms of fasting even though we were not bound to them at our young ages.

When Easter came we were happy. We felt we had really tried to prepare for it, and because we had we were much more inclined to participate in — and appreciate — the great events of Holy Week.

Fifty years later, I still see the wisdom of those early guides who taught us the importance of the season and who encouraged us — the more classic language now — to prayer, fast-

ing and almsgiving.

What will I do this year? I want to add to normal prayer routines the practice of quiet prayer while I'm driving along in my car. I have no particular agenda for that time. Sometimes, I'll pray for those in need or those who have asked for prayer. Sometimes, I'll ask the Lord to touch my personal and ministerial needs. Most of all, I'd just like to be quiet and listen.

Fasting? I wrote above that I occasionally observed the church's law of fasting when I was too young to be required to do it. Now I am too old to be bound by that law! (It applies to those between 18 and 59 years of age.) But fast I shall because I believe it is a good and healthy thing to do. In the practical order, that means that I'll eat one full meal each day. The other two meals taken together will not include more food than the full meal. I'll also cut out any consumption of alcohol and all desserts except fruit.

Almsgiving? My focus in this regard will be Sacred Heart Cathedral's participation in Operation Rice Bowl. We have a container for donations to that project near our dining room table at the parish house. The opportunity Operation Rice Bowl offers to share what we have with those in need is a most appropriate one for the Lenten season.

I share all of this with you for reasons similar to the ones that led my friends and me to explore our Lenten possibilities 50 years ago — for support, encouragement and prayer. I appreciate those gifts from you during Lent and promise that you will have them from me.

Whatever the choices you may make about prayer, fasting and almsgiving, I hope that your observance of Lent will bring you a deeper awareness of God's tender, abiding love for you and of your call from God to share those gifts with your neighbors.

Peace to all.

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