

COLUMNISTS

Identifying 'addictions' as Lenten activity

The big flap now underway is about St. Patrick's Day and Lenten abstinence. You might be thinking that the corned beef fracas reinforces a perception held by some that Catholics are overly legalistic, hypocritical, and trying to earn salvation through inconsequential devotional practices.

Therefore you probably assume that this column will charge ahead with other matters, like insight about how our Catholic identity should inform our response to the floods in Mozambique or the struggle to raise the minimum wage in our own country or the effect that rising fuel prices have on the poorest among us. But I can't resist offering my two cents on the topic of about how we might best spend our Lenten energies.

Like many readers of this newspaper, I've been through the Catholic Lenten pendulum. First, for many years, we were supposed to give up something we really liked for the 40 days of Lent, except on Sundays, which were exempt. (On Sundays we could resume the practice we had decided to give up). After that the idea shifted so that, instead of giving up something, we were invited to take up a positive practice that did some good for ourselves, someone else, or a particular part of the suffering world.

The effect of these two extremes often left me with only ambiguous results. I can remember our whole family being quite proud on Easter mornings because we had successfully abstained from some desired food or drink for all of Lent.



the
moral
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

The only problem was that we absolutely gorged ourselves that Sunday on the very thing we had "given up for Lent." Then we generally returned to whatever use or abuse of the desired substance had been our practice before Lent began!

When the practice switched to doing something positive, however, the results were even worse. Even if I began with enthusiasm and good intentions, my efforts generally fizzled only a few days after Ash Wednesday and I never persevered in whatever good action I vowed to undertake.

Last week, I sent a memo to some colleagues of mine who forwarded their suggestions for a good Lent. These ideas ranged from writing daily notes to people we want to keep in touch with, to looking for ways to put ourselves in touch with goodness, like reading a good book or watching a good movie. The suggestion I want to propose today, however, came from a colleague who referred to the work of Dr. Gerald May, *Addictions*

and *Grace*. The passage that meant the most to me was one that spoke about the need we all have to root out various forms of addiction from our lives. It reads: "Addiction is any compulsive, habitual behavior that limits the freedom of human desire. It is caused by the attachment, or nailing, of desire to specific objects." (p. 24) "Addiction exists wherever persons are internally compelled to give energy to things that are not their true desires." (p. 14)

Hearing the word 'addiction,' though, can conjure up images like bottles hidden in brown paper bags or arms marred by needle marks — signs many of us assume have little to do with ourselves. Dr. May assures us, however, that the addictions that keep most of us from 'our truest desires' involve other sorts of practices, too. He includes our addiction to ideas, work, relationships, power, moods, and fantasies. I might include for myself television (last week I had only about 10 free minutes the whole time, and spent it 'clicking' through simultaneous weather reports — as if the weather on channel 10 would somehow end up better than that offered on channels 8 or 13!). For others I know, sports can become addictive, even threatening spousal relationships and family well-being. The need for control, possessions, or leisure time can also keep us from what we most deeply need and truly desire. So can dietary habits, drinking habits, friendship patterns, telephone use and shopping. Even good things, like saving money, can

become addictive and inhibit our moving on with our most important agendas.

In my opinion, attending to some of these issues would be the best use of our Lenten time and energy. We have so many ways in which cultural forces support our need to care for our health and our bodies. But so very little about our culture assists in the care of our souls. Just learning to identify our own 'addictions' would be a fine Lenten activity.

We can detect these tendencies by noticing how quickly we become dissatisfied, for example. A friend of mine wrote this sentence: "I don't know about you, but the more stations they put on TV, the faster I channel surf, and the more I complain, 'There's nothing on TV.'" Another sure sign is the "I can't get it out of my mind" syndrome. Feeling distracted in our activities because we're wondering what's going on elsewhere is an example of this. So is making sure we've just purchased the latest and best items that interest us: CD players, sneakers, computers, golf clubs, automobiles, sushi.

I think we owe it to our souls to try something for Lent that attends to our ultimate destiny and to the health and exercise not just of our bodies, but this time of our souls as well. Wishing all a Happy St. Patrick's Day and a Happy St. Joseph's Day this weekend.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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