

A LENTEN SPIRITUALITY

Lent is 40 days long, not including Sundays, as every Sunday is considered a celebration of the Resurrection (so technically Lent covers a period of 46 days). Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, and it ends on the morning of Holy Thursday, three days before Easter Sunday.

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of fasting and abstinence from eating meat. The extent and type of fasting is up to each individual. Some who are already fasting from sugar, sweets, etc. may consider not so much fasting during Lent, as perhaps trying to do some loving action more, like praising someone or blessing someone each day.

At the beginning of Lent, we are reminded of the three disciplines we are encouraged to practice: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. There is an intimate connection of these disciplines to the new commandment Jesus gave us – not just to love God with our whole being, but also to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

To pray is to be more and more aware of how loved we are by God, and to love God back through prayer, praise and worship. So Lent is a time to add depth and heart-felt intensity to our prayer life. It can be a time to practice a more contemplative style of prayer, especially *Lectio Divina*, or praying with scripture in solitude and silence.

To fast is to actually love ourselves, to indulge less in, and to be less distracted by, external activities and food so as to be more in touch with our inner selves, our emotions, thoughts and imagination. We can work at accepting ourselves as we are more fully, and forgive ourselves our past mistakes and sins. We can be open to receiving feedback from others on how they see us, and what it is in our personality that we might want to let go of and change.

To give alms is to love our neighbor. It is good to be reminded that for Vincentians, charity is characterized by affective and effective love, Incarnational spirituality directly connected to action, a love that is creative even to infinity, and the inter-connectedness of prayer and action, reflection and service, faith and charity. And the bottom line is that for Vincentians, the poor represent Jesus Christ.

So Lent is a privileged time to be more aware of the needs of others, and to reach out to try to meet those needs. Within the limitations of pandemic protocol, we can give our time, treasure and talent to others. Even if we can't be present to others in person, we can use technology to communicate and care. Is there someone we know who needs some encouragement, some affirmation, help in finding his or her voice? To bless others is to actually give them life and vitality. To truly, sincerely and genuinely listen to someone else's concern is to be a healing presence in that person's life. As Alice Millar, author of *Drama of the Gift Child* noted towards the end of her illustrious career as a psychologist, all that people really need to heal is a "listening witness."

Don shared with his group during a men's retreat how he was looking forward to a three-month sabbatical after his non-profit initiative merged with another. However, at the same time, he became aware that his foster child, now 16, was in trouble with the law, and needed a father figure in his life to avoid the same fate of incarceration as his father. Although many were advising him against it, he knew deep within he had to take the boy in, or he would regret that for the rest of his life. He was living Lenten spirituality, and serves as a model for us all.

May this Lenten season be for us Vincentians a time to be creative, find new ways to practice these disciplines, and live out the commandment of Jesus, as did our founders.

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