

Homily for Ash Wednesday – Feb 2023 (Year A)

February 22, 2023

By Deacon Richard Hay

“Lent?”

What exactly is Lent?

Yes, it is the forty-day period that we observe before Easter and it is also the period during which we are encouraged to spend more time focused on praying, fasting, and almsgiving to grow closer to Christ as we hear in the gospel.

However, the question I am asking is what exactly is Lent for each one of us.

Is it just dates on a calendar that we make our way through until Easter arrives? Is it just a period of time where we might give up chocolate, coffee, soda, social media, or some other thing because that is what we have always done during Lent in the past?

It might be time to try a new approach to Lent. That it not just be days on the calendar, or simply giving up something just for the sake of giving something up.

It is important to put some thought into why we are doing these things, into why the church provides this period of forty days on the calendar, and how we can individually and as a faith community spend this time truly growing closer to God which is why this season exists.

In his message for Lent this year, Pope Francis writes - "Lenten penance is a commitment, sustained by grace, to overcoming our lack of faith and our resistance to following Jesus on the way of the cross."

The Holy Father goes on to say that "tradition is a source of inspiration for seeking new paths and for avoiding the temptation of immobility."

In these two short passages, the Pope is providing a roadmap for Lent.

First is commitment. Commitment needs to be taken to the next level and rather than just giving something up, what about adding something in our faith life. For instance, at Sacred Heart each Friday in

Lent there will be a soup supper followed by stations of the cross – one of our Church’s traditions. Maybe another option is to spend more time reflecting, praying, and meditating on scripture, or learning how to pray part of the Liturgy of the Hours.

Next, how can grace be sustained?

Well, where does grace come from? It comes from the sacraments. During Lent we can grow closer to the Lord and be strengthened by grace through reception of the sacraments – in particular the Eucharist and Reconciliation. There will be multiple opportunities for reconciliation here and at other neighboring Catholic churches during Lent. In addition to our weekend schedule, we have daily masses Monday through Friday to receive the Lord in the Eucharist but Jesus is also always present in the tabernacle, and all are welcomed to stop in the church during the day to spend a little quiet time in prayer with Him.

To overcome our lack of faith and resistance to following Jesus fully to the cross, the answer is all of the above. Scripture, prayer, and receiving the sacraments for their sustaining grace.

Finally, the Holy Father mentions seeking new paths that help us avoid past immobility.

In other words, choose to not stick with the status quo but try something new for Lent. Our church is full of traditions and devotions that can be adopted and learned. It is easy to be comfortable with past approaches to Lent. The question to ask ourselves, is did those efforts become new ways for us to be devoted and closer to Christ and were they sustained after Lent was over?

If the answer to either of those questions is no – then it is time to consider a new approach during Lent because ultimately, if nothing changes – then nothing changes.

The goal is not to *survive* Lent but flourish by growing closer to the Lord and by seeking penance for our sinfulness. Our efforts in the next 40 days and beyond will allow the Lord to mold our hearts to be more like His and that will prepare us to celebrate the Easter mysteries. As a result – just like the Lord promised – our reward will be great in heaven.