



Beginning My Lenten Patterns

From the *Online Ministries*, CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY - A Franciscan Catholic University
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"Insanity is defined as doing the same thing over, and over again, expecting different results."

This saying, commonly used in 12 Step programs, reveals a real wisdom. It can be a good beginning reflection as we examine the choices we will make in the days ahead. It is very simple. Our Lord is calling us to a "change of heart." And, we know from experience, that nothing will change, unless we change our patterns. To expect different results is insanity.

SO WHAT NEEDS CHANGING?

We start to come to know that by asking for help. "Lord, help me to know what needs changing." It is often said, "Be careful about what you ask for." This is one of those requests that God must surely want to answer.

Then, we have to listen. With a little bit of reflection, most of us will just begin to "name" things that make up our ordinary habits and ways of being who we are, that we aren't very proud of. Things we do and things we never get around to doing. We can "feel" the call to change our attitudes, our self-absorption, or our way of interacting with others. Maybe I don't take God very seriously. I go to Church on Sunday, and contribute my share, but I don't really take time to deal with my relationship with God. Perhaps I've let my mind and fantasy get cluttered with escapist litter. I might begin to name a number of self-indulgent habits. I may realize I rarely, if ever, hear the cry of the poor, and can't remember when I've answered that cry. It could be that dishonesty on all kinds of levels has become a way of life. One of the roadblocks in my relationship with God and others may be deep wounds or resentments from the past, things I continue to hold against others or myself.

BEGINNING NEW PATTERNS DURING LENT

Something we can all do is commit ourselves to being more reflective during Lent. It just means that I'm going to make a point of being more observant, more aware of what I'm experiencing - paying more attention to what is "automatic" behavior. And, I then start paying attention to my desires. We have all kinds of desires. During Lent, I can reflect upon the desires I currently have and which of them need to be purified, which may need to be abandoned, and which are wonderful desires that are there, but I haven't acted

upon them. Naming our deepest desires will guide the choices we make to establish new patterns for Lent.

PRAYING

Lent is the time to start new patterns of prayer. Perhaps I haven't been praying at all. This is a great time to choose to begin. It is important to begin realistically. I can start by simply pausing when I get up and taking a slow, deep breath, and recalling what I have to do this day, and asking for grace to do it as a child of God. I may want to go to bed a half an hour earlier, and get up a half an hour earlier and give myself some time alone to read the

readings for the day or a Daily Reflection. I may choose to go to Mass each day during Lent. I may choose to get to church on Sunday, just 15 minutes earlier, so I can reflect a bit. Lent may be a time I would want to choose to start to journal the day to day reflections, the desires I'm naming and asking for, the graces I am being given.

EATING

Lent is a great time to change our eating patterns. This is not about "losing weight" or "getting in shape," though for most of us, paying attention to what we eat, will make a difference in our overall health. This is about being more alert. Anyone who has tried to diet knows that something changes in us when we try to avoid eating. The monks in the desert, centuries ago, discovered that fasting - simply not eating - caused a tremendous boost to their consciousness. Not only did their bodies go on "alert," but their whole person seemed to be in a more heightened state of



attention. The whole purpose of fasting was to aid prayer - to make it easier to listen to God more openly, especially in times of need. Among Catholics, only Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are named as days of fast we all do together. (And that fast is simply to eat only one full meal in the day, with the other two meals combined, not equal to the one.) On the Wednesdays and Fridays of Lent, we may want to try to fast more intentionally. Of

*You are always merciful!
Please wipe away my sins.
Wash me clean from all of my
sin and guilt. Psalm 51*

course, always conscious of our health and individual nutrition needs, we may want to try to eat very little, except some juices, or perhaps a small amount of beans and rice. We will experience how powerfully open and alert we feel and how much easier it is to pray and to name deeper desires. Not only will I feel less sluggish and tired, I will feel simply freer and more energized.

The other powerful advantage of fasting is that it can be a very simple gesture that places me in greater solidarity with the poor of the earth, who often have very little more than a little rice and beans each day. Powerful things happen in me, when I think about those people in the world who have so much less than I do. And, it's a great cure for self-pity.

PRACTICING GENEROSITY

Almsgiving has always been an important part of Lent. Lent begins with the powerful Isaiah 58, on the Friday and Saturday after Ash Wednesday. It is important to give ourselves the experience of fasting from being ungenerous. Generosity is not simply giving my excess clothes to a place where poor people might purchase them. It's not even writing a "generous" check at the time a collection is taken up for a cause that benefits the poor.

These are wonderful practices. Generosity is an attitude. It is a sense that no matter how much I have, all that I have is gift, and given to me to be shared. It means that sharing with others in need is one of my personal priorities. That is quite different from assessing all of my needs first, and then giving away what is left over. A spirit of self-less giving means that one of my needs is to share what I have with others. Lent is a wonderful time to practice self-less giving, because it takes practice. This kind of self-sacrificing generosity is a religious experience. It places us in solidarity with the poor who share with each other, without having any excess. It also joins us with Jesus, who gave himself completely, for us. Establishing new patterns of giving will give real life and joy to Lent.

PRACTICING PENANCE

When I sprain my ankle, part of the healing process will involve physical therapy. It's tender, and perhaps it is swollen. It may be important to put ice on it first, to

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reduce the inflammation. I may want to wrap it an elevate it and stay off of it. Then I will need to start moving it and then walking on it, and eventually, as the injury is healed, I'll want to start exercising it, so that it will be stronger than it was before, so that I won't as easily injure it again.

Penance is a remedy, a medicine, a spiritual therapy for the healing I desire. The

Lord always forgives us. We are forgiven without condition. But complete healing takes time. With serious sin or with bad habits we've invested years in forming, we need to develop a therapeutic care plan to let the healing happen. To say "I'm sorry" or to simply make a "resolution" to change a long established pattern, will have the same bad result as wishing a sprained ankle would heal, while still walking on it. Lent is a wonderful time to name what sinful, unhealthy, self-centered patterns need changing and to act against them by coming up with a strategy. For example, if the Lord is shining a light into the darkness of a bad pattern in my life, I can choose to "stop doing it." But, I have to work on a "change of heart" and to look concretely at what circumstances, attitudes, and other behaviors contribute to the pattern. If I'm self-indulgent with food, sex, attention seeking behaviors and don't ask "what's missing for me, that I need to fill it with this?" then simply choosing to stop the pattern won't last long. Lasting healing needs the practice of penance.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER - ALONE AND WITH OTHERS

In the end, the prayer of St. Augustine places us in the right spirit for Lent:

O Lord, our Lord, you have created us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

Lent is indeed how God draws us home, as individuals. But, it is also a very communal journey. We never journey alone, no matter how "lonely" we may feel. We are always journeying together. If we can experience our journey in communion with others, it makes it so much clearer that we are on a journey together. When I can share my experience with even one other close friend, or with my regular worshipping community, I can enjoy and share the support and environment that allows grace to flourish.

Let us pray for each other on this journey, especially those who need and desire a change of heart on this pilgrimage to Easter joy.

