

Ash Wednesday - 2016

While I was living in Washington I enrolled one semester in a yoga class. It was quite interesting to see how the search for integration plays itself out in another tradition.

One thing that struck me was the yoga instructor's invitation at the beginning of each session to "set our intention" for the coming 60 minutes.

At first I didn't get what she was talking about. "What intention? I just want to limber up and maybe tone up a bit."

But since the invitation was made at the beginning of every class I was able to let the idea sink in a bit, and discovered that there were other possibilities to be embraced beyond the immediately obvious:

- to develop a better response to stress;
- to simplify my life;
- to engage in a communal activity;

Some of my classmates, who were more serious about their yoga practice than I was, saw it as an opportunity to send out positive energy into the world.

There were a lot of different intentions being set at the beginning of the session, and there could be a lot of intentions being exercised this evening

as we mark the beginning of the Lenten season.

Why are you here? The answer might be simple: "it's just something we Catholics do." or "I would not want to risk not coming." or "It's important to me to practice penance."

It might be more involved. On Sunday we sent our catechumen and our candidates for full communion to be bishop for recognition that they will be receiving the Easter sacraments this year.

For them, Lent is full of meaning. It's the final stage of preparation for a big event in their lives: becoming a full and permanent member of the Catholic Church.

Part of the intention they have set for themselves is to take the Lenten season seriously, not only in terms of embracing the call to conversion, but also in terms of paying attention to how the season unfolds, how the community celebrates it, and what the long-term effects of it are.

I would like to encourage you to do something similar. Even for us who have been baptized Lent can be a season of preparation for the renewal of our baptismal promises and the recommitment to the life of discipleship that that entails.

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In fact, that sort of intention has much more potential for long-term and lasting change than simply giving up chocolate for 40 days, only to splurge again once Easter comes.

Can you think about Lent as an opportunity, not just to give something up, so as to join in the sufferings of Christ, but to embrace that one thing that, if you were to do it from now on, would make a difference not only for you, but for others.

Perhaps this Lent will be the moment to make the connection between the things I take for granted and the utter lack of them elsewhere.

There was a commercial during the Super Bowl about how much water goes down the drain if you let it run while you brush your teeth. Something like 50 gallons a week. That's a barrel of water! I had no idea.

Upon seeing that, we may have enough motivation to turn the water off while we brush. What could further motivate us is the acknowledgement that too many people in the world don't even have clean water, let alone clean water to waste.

Can we use this Lent to look into the causes of that and see whether we are unwittingly participating in a system that allows such a thing to continue?

That would combine the two Lenten practices of fasting (from wasting water) and almsgiving (doing something about the water crisis elsewhere) that could lead to real change, inside and out.

Set your intention! You've already begun that process by showing up on a Wednesday night when there was no external obligation to do so.

Take the next step. Make an intention to keep the ball rolling, not only until Easter, but on into the future until God's reign on the earth is complete.