

Ash Wednesday 2017

A couple of days ago someone asked me what I was going to give up for Lent. They were unimpressed when I said “ketchup.”

I like ketchup, but it’s true, giving up ketchup—at least in my case—would not really be much of a sacrifice, nor is it all that evident how giving it up would have much effect on my spiritual life.

I was making a joke, actually, because, at that point, I had not yet decided what I was going to give up.

What should we give up for Lent? One college student I know said she was going to give up food (she wanted to lose some weight).

Because I know her, I asked “How about beer.” She laughed and said, “No, never beer—there are some things you just can’t live without.”

What should we give up? I guess the answer depends on what we hope to accomplish with our Lenten observance.

If we see it as a chance to take another stab at improving our health, or dropping a dress size, maybe giving up food, or beer, will serve the purpose.

But if we want the sacrifice to be meaningful it ought to be connected somehow with what’s really going on in our interior life—what the issues are in my growth as a follower of Jesus.

It might be good to give some thought to what the Church recommends with the promotion of Lenten practices.

The way Lent, and especially the readings of Lent, are structured, the first thing we need to give up is the presumption that we are in a position to save ourselves, and that we are doing an adequate job of doing so.

For the next three weeks, we will be reminded of how wide the gap is between the call to discipleship and how we have been living it out.

And if we recognize the gap, then it becomes immediately clear that it is actually too large for us to bridge.

The three weeks that follow emphasize where our salvation comes from—the person of Jesus Christ.

Lent is the time of year, above all others, when we recognize our need for salvation.

We confront the forms of denial we use to comfort ourselves in the face of the demand for change. We let the unvarnished truth of our lives come to consciousness. We quit lying to ourselves.

Without this first, painful step, nothing else will happen.

After the reception of ashes we will be dismissing the elect to give them a chance to steep themselves in the word of Scripture.

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Already in the course of the RCIA process they have been confronting the truth of their lives and have been doing the hard work of opening themselves to conversion.

Because of their response to the call to conversion, we have found them worthy to receive the Easter sacraments at the end of these last 40 days of preparation.

For the rest of us, we will renew our baptismal promises at the end of that same period. We will profess again our willingness to believe in the power of God to save, even as we commit ourselves to resist evil and all its empty promises.

Today, as we take these ashes upon our heads we put aside any private interpretations of what they mean, and accept the Church's call: "Remember, you are dust and unto dust you shall return. Repent, and believe in the Gospel."