

Whatcha gonna do for Lent? And I do mean “whatcha gonna do” and not just whatcha gonna give up. As you know, Lent isn’t just about giving things up – an aspect of fasting. The three things Jesus talked about in the gospel are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. It’s worthwhile to do something, something special, something you don’t normally do, in all of these areas.

Whatcha gonna do in the way of prayer? Prayer isn’t just a matter of spending your time stringing words together, prayer is a matter of spending time with God. That’s what makes it valuable. It doesn’t matter what form your prayer takes, whether it be memorized prayers, free-flowing prayers, Scripture based prayer, or just spending some quiet time with God. You might consider spending some time in the Adoration Chapel. If you’ve never done that before just try five or ten minutes at first. Pray there whatever way you want. And don’t be surprised if you find you want to spend more time there.

Whatcha gonna do in the way of almsgiving? Almsgiving always sounds to me like putting some coins in a beggar’s cup but it has to do with giving any kind of care to anyone who needs it. Do you know anybody who could use your help? Help them! Do you know anybody who needs someone to be kind to them? Be kind to them! Almsgiving expands to doing acts of love – not just to people who can love us back – as Jesus says elsewhere, if you love those who love you, what’s so great about that? Love the ones who can’t love you back!

That’s just the tip of the iceberg on prayer and almsgiving, but we mustn’t ignore fasting. The prophet Joel sounds absolutely excited about it: “Blow the trumpet in Zion! Proclaim a fast, call an assembly; gather the people...” etc. Whatcha gonna do in the way of fasting? This is where giving stuff up comes in. We should give things up that we like but are not sinful. If it is sinful we shouldn’t be doing it anyway, but it is good to do without little things we enjoy but don’t need. Giving up candy is a popular favorite, or computer games, or a favorite TV show. I’m giving up desserts. I’m not saying that because I want you to think about how wonderful I am, that would be a direct violation of what Jesus said in the gospel. I’m saying that so you don’t tempt me!

That brings another thought to my mind. Is it sinful to go back on our Lenten promises? I suppose it can be if we deliberately go back on a promise we make to God, but most of the time we just forget, or get lazy about it. I tend to think that messing up on one’s Lenten promises is not so much sin as a missed opportunity. These things are supposed to have a spiritual purpose, they are not just arbitrary rules.

Now there are rules for Catholics concerning Lent. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are to be days of fasting and abstinence. Fasting, in this context, means no eating between meals and less than the usual amount of eating at meals, the two minor meals not adding up to the main meal. Abstinence means to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and all of the Fridays of Lent. There are age limits to these things but if you are able, you

should do it, I think. But don't do it just because it's a rule, do it as a gift to God, do it as a way to build your self-discipline, keeping in mind that the word 'discipline' comes from the same root as the word 'disciple.'

In the gospel, Jesus was dealing with people who bragged about their religiosity. In the world today, however, one doesn't earn a great number of points by being religious or by doing religious things. In many circles religious people are only tolerated, considered old-fashioned, or just not living in the real world. We still shouldn't go around bragging about our religious acts, but neither should we be hiding them out of fear of what people might think.

Doing the right things is important but doing the right things for the right reasons is even more important. The right reasons for our Lenten practices don't have to do with showing off, or losing weight, or that kind of thing. Lent is not that kind of self-help program. The right reasons for our Lenten practices are spiritual. The goal is for us to become more what God wanted us to be in the first place.

Whatcha gonna do for Lent? Hopefully give more of yourself to God so that your relationship with him becomes deeper and richer.