



Lent Begins this Wednesday Beginning My Lenten Practice

"Insanity is defined as doing the same thing over, and over again, expecting different results." This saying 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. Perhaps a spouse, a loved one, a friend, a family member, a co-worker has told me something about myself that gets in the way of communication, that makes relating to them difficult. 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. You are always merciful! Please wipe away my sins. **Wash me clean from all of my sin and guilt.** - Psalm 51

First Step: Begin

Something all of us can 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.

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Second Step: 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 that I want to do this day, more aware that I am a child of God. It may take time to: change the schedule and give myself some time alone to read the readings for the day; choose to go to Mass each day during Lent; get to church 15 minutes earlier, so I can reflect a bit.

Third Step: Fasting (not just from food!) Lent is a great time to be more alert. 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. Also, 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.

Fourth Step: Almsgiving/Generosity Almsgiving has always been an important part of Lent. 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. 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.

Fifth Step: Penance Penance/Confession 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. 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 - *O Lord, our Lord, you have created us for yourself
and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*