

8th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (February 27, 2022)

It's a bit of providence, just a few days away from Ash Wednesday and another season of Lent, that we hear this gospel about the conversion we need to focus more on our own faults instead of those of others. Jesus' call to repentance and conversion is extended to us all year long and all life long, but it takes on a special intensity during Lent. Speaking of which: please note in today's bulletin the Mass schedule for Ash Wednesday and the Lenten fasting and abstinence regulations. We may think of such things as uniquely Catholic, but they are not. Fasting and abstinence—depriving oneself of food for a certain period of time or of specific kinds of food—are ancient practices. Both Old and New Testaments indicate fasting as a well-known spiritual discipline, and Jesus spoke of its importance a number of times in the gospels. Other world religions also give fasting an important role; the Moslems, for example, fast during their month of Ramadan.

So with another Lenten season just around the corner, we ask or hear: “what are you giving up for Lent?” I also hear it said at times that the idea of giving up something for Lent is out-of-date, that Vatican II did away with that, and that we should focus on doing something good for others instead. It is true that the Church modified some of the details on the laws of fast and abstinence, and of course we ought to do acts of charity and mercy for others (and certainly not just during Lent)—Jesus could not have been clearer about that. But fasting—‘giving up something’—is still very much encouraged as an important part of the spiritual life. Why? What's the point of fasting, of ‘giving up something for Lent’ or at any other time?

For one thing, it gives us an opportunity and challenge to engage in self-discipline, to curb and control our wants and appetites so that they don't end up controlling us. We know through our awareness of the experience of others or perhaps even of ourselves what can happen if one's desire for food or alcohol or money or possessions or sex is not brought under some control. Such things, even though not evil or sinful in themselves, can end up controlling and even hurting us and/or those we love. Controlling our appetites of whatever kind is essential lest they end up controlling us instead, and our Lenten fasting or ‘giving it up’ can be a big help with that.

Along the same lines, fasting can help us break out of our sense of entitlement—thinking that we somehow deserve everything we want and when we want it...as in ‘right now’. This is an especially strong temptation in our own country—the richest, most materially wealthy culture the world has ever known and which allows us to have pretty much whatever we want when we want it (at least compared to much of the rest of the world). Again, that wealth is not evil in itself. But fasting of whatever kind is an important help in growing in the virtue of detachment—not being so bound or attached to things that they end up controlling us and our relationships with God and with others.

Fasting also helps us recognize our need for and dependence on God as our top priority and greatest good. If we regularly give in to our desires because we have the wherewithal to do so, then we can easily fall into the trap of thinking ourselves to be self-sufficient and thus not really needing God or others. Fasting, on the other hand, opens us up to experiencing a basic hunger and need—certainly a need for physical nourishment in the case of fasting from certain foods, but even more our basic need for God and for his grace and mercy. In this sense fasting also

becomes a powerful spiritual discipline—drawing us closer to Christ and his Cross. Let's not forget that life as a follower of Jesus is not supposed or promised to be without hardship...as Jesus said more than once about taking up our own crosses if we are serious about following him. He certainly denied himself; Jesus said 'no' to himself so he could give his complete and unconditional 'yes' to the Father and to us—down to the last drop of his Precious Blood. Can we really be so small-hearted and small-minded as to not give up some small pleasure to show in a specific way our gratitude to the Lord for what he has first given us??

So...what will we 'give up' for Lent? The Church regulations are rather minimal; again, the bulletin has the details for a reminder. I hope, however, that we would want to go beyond the legal minimum and not look for loopholes to make it easier on us. Fasting is not supposed to be 'easy' or pain-free; otherwise we are losing the whole point. It ought to have a personal meaning and a real sacrifice. For example: I could say that I'm giving up liver and brussel sprouts for Lent—but since I can't stand either of those things, that's not exactly a Lenten 'sacrifice', is it? So if you are a chocoholic or really look forward to that beverage or other goodie that you really crave, that might indeed be a good candidate to 'give up.'

Or: how about giving up what Jesus called his disciples to give up in today's gospel: the quick judgments, speaking harshly or judgmentally about others, or joining the crowd in piling on someone? Are we mindful of what we say, how we speak about others and the language we use in doing so? In this gospel Jesus said "...from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks"—echoing what we heard from Sirach in the first reading: "The fruit of a tree shows the care it has had; so too does one's speech disclose the bent of one's mind." What do those around us see and hear when we speak? Do they hear someone who is trying (even if not always successfully) to live as a follower of Jesus? Or do they not? Our words, our speech really does reveal what's inside us—either the spirit of Christ or the spirit of 'not-Christ'. I wonder what we would think, how we would respond, if we had to watch and listen to a recording of ourselves and everything we said on any given day? It just perhaps would not be the prettiest of sights. I suspect we would all cringe at least a few times and think "oh, my goodness—did I really say that? Did I really look that sarcastic and mean?" If we can imagine that reaction on our part, we might just have some new ideas on what to try to give up for Lent...and thereafter as well!

As we prepare to begin Lent 2022 this Wednesday, let's all ask the Holy Spirit to help us know what he wants each of us individually to 'give up', to change, to work on. We very well might not like at all the answer the Spirit gives us. It may well strike a little too close to home and make us uncomfortable and disturb the illusion that we're OK just the way we are and that we don't really need to change because, after all, 'it's not like I killed anyone or anything like that'. We might not like the answer the Spirit gives us...but let's not run away from the challenge, not if we are serious about saying we love Jesus and we want to follow him. He is always calling us to holiness and conversion, and Lent is the season par excellence to take that call more seriously. God's grace is always available to help rise to his challenge; let's not hesitate or be afraid to ask for that grace we need to do so.