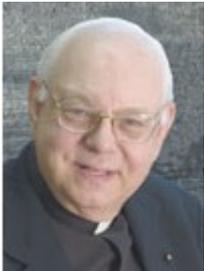


# Practice makes perfect: The reason we sacrifice during Lent



Back in the day, as thousands upon thousands of Catholic Americans remember, this writer included, the nuns urged their parochial school students “to give up” something for Lent.

Candy often made the list. Probably movies ran a close second.

That old advice is worth considering once again, not because making life slightly miserable is good. Candy is not the devil’s concoction!

“Giving up” something at Lent had several very good purposes, each of which applies today.

First, it makes a person think: What truly is important in life? It is not the taste of sweets. More broadly, it is not experiencing what is called “the good life.”

Instead, it is finding direction and a sense of purpose in life, building strength to bear burdens, whatever form that they may take, and realizing that every person is treasured and unique in the eyes of almighty God, and that this blessed status brings access to eternal communion with God.

Many glimpse this communion here on earth, by experiencing in their hearts an awareness of God, finding security and peace, because they know God and trust God.

No human emotion nor nothing earthly matches the majesty of feeling this belonging to – and being with – God.

Never shortchange miracles. God's grace instantly can bring to hearts the impulse to reform and totally to be with God, but for many, maybe most, it requires determination and effort.

A feature of this winter was the Winter Olympic games in China. The Super Bowl in February attracted tens of millions of television viewers. People paid thousands of dollars for tickets to get into the stadium to see the best in the sport.

These athletes were not at the top automatically. Each spent untold hours determined and acutely focused on the goal. Each spent vast energy. Each practiced to the point of exhaustion. Talk about "giving up" something. Nothing else took priority.

Lent is about similar discipline: practice, determination and fixing eyes on the goal – namely, the goal of finding and being with God.

Back in those classrooms, the nuns wanted to set the eyes of their students on the most rewarding and precious of goals – being with God – and to develop within the students the habit of disciplining themselves, like athletes, to direct their lives to that goal.

Leaving candy or a movie aside was a means to an end. It prepared the students to be strong when greater temptations came, as indeed they come for any human.

And, hopefully, giving up this or that led the students to think.

In 1473, in England, Robert Wolsey and his wife, Joan, became the parents of a son, who was baptized "Thomas." Robert, a butcher, was in humble circumstances. He worked hard every day to make a living. He owned little.

Soon, it became obvious that their son was gifted enough to go to school. Education was available to few at the time who could not pay.

Thomas studied to be a priest. Ordained in 1498, he immediately impressed his superiors in the Church. They assigned him to the chapel at Windsor Castle, where he rubbed shoulders with royalty. Soon, he was bishop of Lincoln, then archbishop of York. The pope named him a cardinal.

King Henry VIII, before breaking with the papacy, spotted this brilliant man of the Church and named the cardinal his prime minister, to bring order and vision to the government.

Cardinal Wolsey never left the Church, or his place as a priest and bishop, but his focus completely changed. Devoting everything to political interests, and ambition, he eventually was among the wealthiest and most powerful persons on earth.

Unable to escape nature, ill health overtook him. As he was dying, supposedly he said, "If I had served my God as faithfully as I served my king, I would not be afraid to die."

He learned what is important.

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