

Don't Be Stuck In A Rut This Lent!

This Lent, don't be stuck in a rut. If we want things to be different — i.e. better — we must do things differently. A fresh approach can be invigorating.

Consider a two-part plan for starters.

- **Part 1: Give something up for Lent.**

About this time of year I brace myself for my one big pre-Lent pet peeve. As Ash Wednesday approaches, several people will whisper their little secret to me: "Father, I'm not going to give up anything for Lent this year. All of this denial stuff is too negative."

And then they proudly declare, "I am only going to do something positive this Lent."

I realize it is not nice to say in reply, "Bad plan," but it truly is misguided. Lent is a penitential season, and self-denial is an indispensable penitential practice.

Repentance is important

The "negative" part of Lent is the focus on sin. It is not very "positive" to pay attention to our evildoing, but we must. Jesus said "repent" in his opening statement in Mark's Gospel (Mark 1:15).

"Repent, and believe in the Gospel" is the formula for the signing with ashes. Repent means, "Quit sinning," "Be sorry for sin" and "Change for the better." It takes tremendous self-control and self-denial to stop sinning. We may not like self-denial, but Jesus demands it: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself" (Mark 8:34).

Self-denial is extremely beneficial because it teaches self-mastery and builds strength to battle temptation.

It is relatively easy to give up a little pleasure. Select something different to give up this year. It could be sweet rolls, cookies, popcorn at bedtime or a favorite TV program. We all have something we really like that we really do not need. Make a firm resolution to give it up for 40 days, no exceptions.

Our desires should not control us, God should. If the item is a sweet roll, when it comes to mind, it is a moment to be mindful of God because our goal to please God is the motivation behind our self-denial.

And, we need to practice saying, "No!" As we get better and better at refusing the sweet roll time after time throughout the day, we gain spiritual mastery over our preferences, particularly our sinful ones, and we become increasingly adept at saying no when temptation comes knocking.

- **Part 2: Do something positive for Lent.**

The people who only wanted to do something positive for Lent had a good idea, but it was incomplete. A balanced approach is both negative and positive — we should give something up and do good works.

Secret Santa for Lent

When it comes to good works, try to be sneaky and invisible. In the Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday, Jesus tells us, "Be on guard against performing religious acts for people to see" (Matthew 6:1). Jesus wants us to be invisible. He also advises, "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matthew 6:3). He wants us to be sneaky — in a good sense.

The purpose of our good works should not be to gain the admiration or thanks of others. If our good works are "sneaky," they will be a pleasant surprise to someone, and if they are "invisible," the person will have no idea who did it and be unable to offer a compliment, sing our praises or return the favor.

Surprise blessings of unknown origin are gifts from God. When we are sneaky and invisible, we are like angels — God's messengers bringing God's blessings.

It is like Secret Santa for Lent.

Leave an encouraging note in someone's cubicle at work.

Put a candy bar on someone's desk or a little gift in someone's mailbox.

Let someone else go first.

Anonymously pay for the meal of someone at another table.

The possibilities are endless. Be creative in finding new ways to be kind to others, and be so clever as to go unnoticed. Then, to God goes the glory!

Father Michael Van Sloun is pastor of St. Stephen in Anoka.