

This reflection appeared first in *The Church World*, the diocesan weekly of Maine.

[<<Hub](#)

© copyright 2003 by S. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

## WHAT SHOULD I GIVE UP FOR LENT?

*Giving up* is a phrase associated with the season of Lent. “What will I give up this year? Let me think about it.” Usually thoughts turn to something a person really likes very much, maybe a delicious desert. No more ice cream. No candy until Easter. Good-bye, cake. All of this is a way of omitting foods truly relished and maybe also subtracting weight someone is eager to see disappear. More importantly, in the sacrifice of food readily available to us, our thoughts turn to the hungry of the world, desperate for any morsel. They have no choice in what to eat, because too often, famished as they are, there is nothing to reach for.

The reason for giving up is not just to deprive myself of some particular satisfaction. The real intention is to focus on the One Who took on Himself the burden of our human nature, not clinging to His divinity as something to be held onto. At the same time we see how looking at Jesus means also fixing our gaze on others who have our common humanity.

Sharing our resources with those who are poorer is a time-honored way of enriching our Lent. “Those who help the needy honor their Maker” (Prv 14:31). We see all kinds of poverty around us and much more so this Lent of 2003. Poverty is not only the material kind. Even with sufficient income, people’s lives can be in a situation of deprivation. Growing older means seeing beloved ones leave this earth. Mourning their absence overtakes the heart. “No one cares about me anymore.” Yes, there is one who does: Jesus Christ. And we are His messengers who convey love and comfort to those whose emotional reserves are so depleted. In our fragile world, no age is free of losses. Christian compassion reaches out wherever we see sorrow. And Lent can be a time for opening our eyes to the sadness we have not paid that much attention to in our own small circle.

Extending ourselves can mean we do give up something, but the return is high. “As generous distributors of God’s manifold grace, put your gifts at the service of one another, in the measure each has received” (1 Pt 4:10). Giving can have the wonderful effect of bringing forth the special giftedness in another. And seeing this, we praise God. Sometimes we are offered thanks, an affirmation that lifts our heart. And if there seems to be no gratitude, we know God is grateful for our effort.

A truly practical giving up could be to focus on our faults and particularly on those that are a burden to our fellows. An example might be the habit of always being late. “Don’t count on him. He won’t be here on time.” The habitually late always have a good excuse and that in turn entrenches them in the ditch of never showing up when the clock says they should. They are always apologetic and usually have a convincing excuse worked up en route to the designated event.

If we are among the always tardy, the burden of our lateness is pushed onto others to bear. Therefore it should be carefully weighed in our personal scrutiny. My saintly novice mistress, Mother Aloysius of the Carmel in Concord, New Hampshire, told us newcomers to the monastery. “Concentrate on those faults which have the most negative effect on other people. Work on them first.”

We were also advised at the end of the day to review our failures and likewise our successes. What helped me succeed? What led me to fail? In trying to undo a fault that has become a habit, I need to ponder the psychological process that got me to this point in time. Or rather this point in timelessness. Just making a resolution is not enough. I have to figure out what causes a failing like continued tardiness to happen. Then I plan the practical steps to overcome that development. Each temperament may have to discover a particular process that counteracts the habit and actually works. Perhaps I must aim at fifteen minutes earlier than the appointed hour. If I should leave the house at 8:00 a.m., I now try for 7:45. “Well, that might get me there too early.” Then I would have the unique experience of waiting for others as they have for me. I might also have the unique experience of being at the very beginning of an event, seeing how things actually start.

Let’s turn to scripture for some help. The author of Ecclesiastes can give a strong dose of reality. “There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under heaven.” Then a repetition occurs, “There is a time for every affair and on every work a judgment” (Ecc 3:1,17). He later tells us, “A wise person knows times” (8:5). The Bible speaks often of time and its value. Consuming the time of others can be stealing something of importance from them.

All we tardy folk, let us turn to the Creator of the passing moments. Let us cherish them for ourselves and for others. I keep my appointment when I am supposed to be there, knowing God is waiting for me in the person of those who no longer need to look at their watches, wondering where I am. This will be my special Lenten practice, much better than saying no to a piece of apple pie. But I might do that too.

Sister Margaret Dorgan, DCM