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A Lent that matters

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Eco Catholic

What would make your Lent the best ever? It's worth pondering because it's not going to happen unless you decide that is your goal.

We've got the advantage of a collective spiritual energy in Lent that can support our efforts, so it's a perfect time to get more serious. And we never know when it's our last Lent, so let's seize the 40 days while we can.

Here's what my ideal Lent would look like.

It would contain no hint of just "going through the motions" based on past conditioning. The chosen disciplines would be carefully discerned, proceeding organically from my present spiritual state.

It would be a unique and meaningful spiritual time, guided more by the Holy Spirit than my worldly mind. Its aim would be a transformation of heart and character that would serve me and the world in the long haul. It seems to me that this is what happened to Jesus in his days in the desert.

Jesus undertook a rigorous program of fasting and solitude, as he must have known that his mission ahead of him that required the utmost spiritual strength and purification. Stripped of comforts, friends and activities, it was just he and God and the wilderness.

There he had to confront his demons—the allure of pleasure, popularity, ego satisfaction, and worldly acclaim and power. Who knows what soul searching and gut-wrenching anguish he went through to commit to serving God alone with a 100% of his being? Fasting and immersion in the natural world were his allies in this struggle and ultimate surrender to God's will.

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What can this experience of Jesus teach us as we begin our Lenten journey?

Jesus did virtually nothing but be present to God. So maybe adding on spiritual practices to an already frantic, full life isn't what we need most. Perhaps taking things away would better serve us.

I'm reminded of spiritual writer Eknath Easwaren's observation that if you offered people a lecture about God or the chance to meet God, most people would choose the lecture.

If Jesus knew he could meet God most directly alone in nature, then maybe that's a strategy we should adopt this Lent. Usually, we carry a bag of props with us, even spiritual ones, that buffer our encounter with God, lest too much be demanded of us. Let's have the courage to lay them aside this Lent.

And let me put in a good word for fasting, and I don't mean the minimal requirements of the church.

For years, I did longer fasts of five to seven days and it was easier to do than imagined because a little button in my brain related to food just clicked off. I was usually hungry the first day, but not after that. The energy usually given to the digestive process was channeled into a higher state of spiritual awareness. And fasting brought up emotional issues big time, causing psychological as well as physical cleansing.

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Fasting is a powerful spiritual tool I urge you to consider. And you're not going to starve or ruin your health in a few days, as some would have you believe. Fasting is great for your health and is recommended many times in the Bible.

Results are what we should be looking for this Lent, lifelong habits and virtues nurtured through our chosen disciplines.

We live in challenging times just as Jesus did, and to be a disciple of Christ requires much spiritual maturity and strength. Following Jesus' example, let's go the extra mile and really expose ourselves to the sometimes scary influence of the living God, which just might turn out to be unconditional acceptance and love.

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