

HOW TO KEEP A GOOD LENT

by

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Each year, as Lent comes, I am asked by interested people as to how they should organize their intentions and ambitions for the forty days. No two persons respond in the same way to Lent, and I am not going to try to prescribe a rigorous course of behavior. Experience tells me, however, that what I propose works, and because it does I am eager to share it with you. Lenten work, for that is what it is, can be organized around three 'S's': Silence, Study, and Service.

SILENCE

The world is a noisy place, and even our small corner of it has more than its fair share of noise. Silence is therefore a rare and precious thing, particularly when we realize that silence is not simply the absence of sound but is also the presence of that which sound ordinarily obscures. For us, silence can be the place in which we both seek and experience the presence of God. I suggest that you secure for yourself *fifteen minutes of absolute silence* during at least one day each week in Lent, in which you do nothing at all — no mental correspondence, no organizing, not even high thinking. Find a space or place in which you can be alone, the bathroom or the bedroom will do, and clear your head. Some find it well to do this at the start of the day, getting up earlier than usual, and others at mid-day, foreshortening lunch, or right before evening begins. Do not schedule your silent time for bedtime: You will fall asleep, and although sleep is silent, it is not the silence of which we speak. I propose one day with a fifteen-minute silence, but once you try it you may crave more, and wonder how you got along without it.

STUDY

An ambitious course of study and rigorous reading is not necessary to make good use of Lent, but some ordered reflection in which your mind is engaged on a regular basis is very much an approved discipline. Set aside *fifteen minutes for study* on one day of each week in Lent. This will take the form of reading for most, but you should think in advance about what it is that you are to read, and organize the reading so that you make the most of your time. Do not try to be too ambitious, as failure will make the possible impossible. If you wish to read from the Bible, choose one of the four gospels and organize your

reading into six sections of fifteen minutes. Perhaps you will want to read through the whole Psalter in the same fashion, reading no more and no less in a single sitting once per week than the fifteen minutes allow. Perhaps you will want to try a book. I suggest J. Barrie Shepherd's *Faces at the Cross: A Lent and Easter Collection of Poetry and Prose*, from Upper Room Books. I am re-reading Diogenes Allen's little book, *Temptation*.

SERVICE

Contrary to popular perception, Lent is not private or personal. From ancient times it has had a communal, public, even civic dimension wherein the faithful are encouraged to do good works and deeds of public charity and private philanthropy. Lest you become too private and self-absorbed in Lent, you should find a way in which you might give time to some work or kindness which is not only for yourself. Fifteen minutes may seem a devilishly small amount of time for good works, given the pressing needs of this world, yet *fifteen minutes of careful and prayerful focus on service*, on what you can and should do as a work of kindness, is not too much to consider, and if well used sets the stage for more extended exercises in charity and philanthropy. Where can you do some good? Who needs your help? What might you do if, for instance, you have spare change? Is there some person or place waiting for your particular skills and graces? Thinking soberly and creatively about these things for fifteen minutes each week is time well spent, and very well spent indeed if it leads you to action.

A ROUTINE FOR PRACTICAL PEOPLE

How should the time be organized? I suggest that every alternate day serve as the occasion for your Lenten disciplines. For example, devote Monday to silence, Wednesday to study, and Friday to service. Or, if you wish, try a Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday schedule. Use the off-day for reflecting upon what you have done or are about to do, perhaps by keeping a record of your thoughts in a diary or journal, or in the form of a letter to yourself or to someone else. If you spend a little time in recording your thoughts about the process you will have the added benefit of charting your journey. Be sure to record your failures and low thoughts as well as your successes and ambitions.

REMEMBER TO TAKE SUNDAYS OFF

The Sundays following Ash Wednesday and through Palm Sunday are Sundays *in* Lent and not Sundays *of* Lent, and from ancient times each of these Sundays has been intended to be a Sabbath from the rigors of the Lenten discipline. Provided that you keep a week-day Lenten discipline such as I have proposed, you will need a Sabbath, a rest, and Sunday is it. Thus, you should endeavor to come to church every Sunday in Lent as reward for your labors, encouragement in the effort, and preparation for the week ahead. You should keep that Sabbath as a holy day along with your fellow Lenten pilgrims: This is another essential aspect of the public nature of Lent. You will need help in your Lenten work, all the help you can get, and you will find it here on Sunday mornings.

MAKING MORE OF LESS

Some will ask what good can come of so little time spent in Lenten work: fifteen minutes every other day of the week, a mere forty-five minutes out a whole week's time? If you feel ambitious you could try to extend the investment by doing the three exercises every day, or one on each day, or you could increase the fifteen minute suggested time, but I hasten to remind you that it is not the quantity of time but its regularity and quality that counts for work in Lent. It is better to succeed in little than to fail in much, and more Christians have been lost to the faith by attempting so much that they are destined to fail, unable to do anything. Spiritually, as in other matters, we must crawl before we walk, and walk before we run or leap. My counsel is to try the routine as proposed until at least mid-Lent, and then adjust it as you wish. The secret is in organizing in advance so that you can practice your Lenten discipline without being distracted by constantly having to think and plan. Make a calendar, produce a schedule, post it on the refrigerator door, and, above all, check off what you have done so that you can visualize your achievement. You would do nothing less than this to lose weight: Why not try at least this to enrich your soul?

During Lent share your progress and your reactions with anyone who will listen. I wish you well in the journey, and pray that this Lent will make a difference in your life as you move toward Easter.

Peter J. Gomes, Lent 1999