Lent

From Sacrifice to Sacred Action

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Lake Institute on Faith & Giving is dedicated to helping people of faith, regardless of their religious tradition, reflect on the relationship between their values, spiritual beliefs and their philanthropy. We found that the three Abrahamic faiths have a considerable amount to learn from each other about philanthropy. Much of all of our lives are spent trying to both understand and demonstrate a true love of humankind.

While Muslims observe Ramadan as a time to purify the soul, refocus attention on God and practice self-sacrifice, Lent is the Christian season of preparation before Easter Sunday. Lent and fasting are synonymous in many traditions. Prayer and almsgiving are key spiritual disciplines of Lent which provide an opportunity to focus more closely on God and Christ’s sacrifice. Yet, sacrifice can be a self-obsession, too.

How many times has avoiding chocolate, caffeine or meat been the guiding mindset of our sacred seasons? Pope Francis, in his 2015 Lenten message, emphasized avoiding indifference in all of its manifestations in the Church – in our religious institutions and in us. Avoiding indifference is the exact opposite of giving up; it requires a focused effort to pay attention. This decision to dig deeper into our beliefs and our love of humankind aligns directly with understanding our personal philanthropic story.

Imagine a society where sharing our philanthropic story dominated each holy season, a time to be both intentional and descriptive about what we are called to do in our faith lives. Each year, Stephen Smith of OpenBible.info tracks Lenten tweets during the week of Ash Wednesday. Food and technology were the most popular categories that Americans reportedly gave up during 2014. The top five choices (school, chocolate, Twitter, swearing, and alcohol) have remained the most consistently popular for Christians since Smith began using Twitter’s API to track Lent in 2009.¹
Pope Francis states, “Every Christian community is called to go out of itself and be engaged in the life of the greater society of which it is a part, especially with the poor and those who are far away.” The challenge for Christians is to re-examine the practice of giving up, which can be synonymous with the worldly obsessions that we seek to leave behind. The opportunity to embrace this time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving can be a new opportunity to establish different rhythms that benefit from our reflection and connection to the God we serve.

There are times when our faith practice focuses on sacrifice or taking something away, and other times when we introduce something new. Integrating new activities or practices into family life can help Lent to resonate with youth and young adults. In Seamless Faith, author Traci Smith shares dozens of simple practices to equip families of all kinds with the tools they need for bringing faith home. At Lake Institute, we are repeatedly reminded about the importance of actively teaching children about the connection between faith and philanthropy. Smith writes, "Faith is learned when it is woven seamlessly into the fabric of everyday life." She offers an exceptional Lenten Practices Calendar for Families that encourages families to explore what they can add into their family experiences.

Self-denial, like the act of fasting, can lay a foundation for spiritual life. We can fast from negative thinking, hyper focus on austerity, apathy and going through the motions. In reviewing why we embark upon the traditions of our faith, we can bring new meaning to practices that may have become too familiar or routine with a renewed focus. The personal journey of faith offers the best insight into what that message can be. It also provides a powerful example to those around us.

The Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy has a strong track record in improving philanthropy to improve the world. As people of faith explore what it means to be engaged in the life that exists outside of our comfort zones and homes – in neighborhoods, communities and a society that desperately needs change agents, this season offers a call to action. Student Kayla Noelle Broughton notes, “As I reflect upon how philanthropy has shaped my life, I am overwhelmed by how shortcomings are able to turn into positive results." Christians, are reminded that Lent is a “time of grace” (2 Cor 6:2), a special season where we can dig deeper into what we believe and offer more than what we will give up. What philanthropic stories shape your understanding of what it means to love humankind?

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