

# LENT

prayer · almsgiving

## STEWARDSHIP IN MOTION

### Christian Sacrifice –Addition by Subtraction

Christians have traditionally – rightfully - associated the season of Lent with sacrifice. A common question heard through the years was *“What are you giving up for Lent?”*

In more recent times there has been a movement to “add” something to our spiritual lives during Lent rather than to “remove” something like ice cream or Hershey bars from our diet. This effort, no doubt, sees this as viewing Lent from a positive rather than a negative perspective and that can be an attractive and profitable step. Sacrifice, however, comes in a variety of forms. If we choose to integrate a daily rosary, weekly prayer group attendance or spiritual reading into our Lenten practice, for instance, this requires us to sacrifice other activities that previously occupied those time periods. In most cases, these trade-offs will be beneficial to us.

Beyond this example, we can explore some of the other elements of sacrifice. In every era, Christians have faced what is termed the cost of discipleship. This term is most often associated with German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose suffering at

the hand of the Nazis is well-known around the world. Bonhoeffer believed the world had become so secularized that even many Christians settled for what he termed; “cheap grace” this was, in his words, *“the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, Communion without confession ... grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace*

*without Jesus Christ.”* Meanwhile, he insisted authentic Christianity required “costly grace,” which was a blessing that confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him. ***“If any man has a mind to come my way, let him renounce self, and take up his cross, daily and follow me.”*** (Luke 9:23)

*“I saw Jesus moving through the world, laden with his Cross, searching for souls to bear it with him; but they all ran away at his approach...so once more I offered myself.”*

Marthe Robin, early 20th century  
French mystic

In tangible terms, our commitment to our Christian path and the costly grace spoken of here can include the sacrifice of time and comfort to achieve a number of goals. One of them is almsgiving. This itself takes many paths, from our weekly church offering to our support of important causes to the contributions we make to the needs of others in our parish and community, in both formal ways and informally.

Another sacrificial act is the relief of suffering, whether of sickness, poverty, anguish or sadness. Given the enormity of the need for all of the above, contemplating how our own small contribution can help can overwhelm us; it can seem like we're using buckets to empty one of the Great Lakes. Fortunately, Our Lord provides for encouragement, particularly in His saints. It is often said, the saints show us Christ. A good role model for us in times such as these is one of the great Doctors of the Church, Saint Catherine of Siena.

Saint Catherine knew tough times indeed! She was born on the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25th, 1347, which in that year was also Palm Sunday. Her twin sister died at birth. Catherine was the 24th of 25 children, yet from what we know only eight of these children survived early childhood. By the time Catherine was of school age Siena, the city of her birth, had already lost 80,000 people to the Black Death which was sweeping Europe at the time.

Young Catherine could have been depressed, fearful and sullen yet she was known in her neighborhood as *"everybody's joy."* She was so joyful and merry that relatives often *"borrowed"* her for a time because she shared her joyfulness and love so abundantly. She was a natural leader among her young friends and cousins, and she was captivated by the Dominicans. She so loved to watch the Dominicans walking about in the parish area that she often walked with her brother around the church. One day as she was walking she noticed a bright light above the church. There she saw a vision of Jesus Christ, seated on a throne, clothed in priestly garments and wearing the papal tiara. Smiling upon Catherine, He blessed her in the manner of a priest. She then looked away from the vision and burst into tears. At that early age, she knew that her path in life was set.

Catherine continued to be a light to all but in her teens she had her bout with worldliness – attending festivals and dancing. But the death in August of 1362 of Saint Bonaventure brought her to tears and cemented her decision to enter the Dominican order.

Catherine's contributions to peaceful resolution of conflicts, of the training of fellow religious and to spiritual contemplations were profound. But never did any of her other activities deter her from her fundamental mission – her care of the poor and the sick. She gave all she had in time and energy.

She was not content to just offer material help but often tended to the sickest and most neglected, including lepers. Though her family was very generous, even they were amazed — and often concerned – that she was so unfailingly generous with anything she had. Catherine, however, cheerfully explained that everything belonged to God and that she was there to help share every blessing. Many stories also abound with how often Catherine, praying for her patients as she administered to them, was able to intercede with God to cure those thought incurable.

As with many saints, Catherine was tormented through much of her life by demonic forces. She had terrifying visions and many temptations for much of her life. Yet she resisted all these temptations, and joyfully went about the Lord's work. Her faith sustained her and her commitment to that faith strengthened her for a life of giving — and sharing. Few of us can even imagine coming close to this remarkable woman's contributions, but what a fine model for each of us as we negotiate the minefield of modernity and all its challenges. This Lent, as we encounter sacrifices of any variety, let us look to Saint Catherine's example to allow these small offerings to help us grow in holiness.

## DID YOU KNOW?

As a boy, Saint Patrick was kidnapped from his homeland and taken to Ireland. He later escaped, but returned, of course, of his own free will as an adult. In his **Confessions**, he said that he returned because of a recurring dream in which the children of Ireland cried out to him, *"Come and walk among us once more."*

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