



PARISH NURSE MINISTRY NOTES



LENT AND HEALTHY LIVING

Instead of or in addition to giving up something for Lent, consider adding to your health and fitness routine. The traditional three pillars of Lent are prayer, fasting and alms giving. These activities are all done as a way for the faithful to become closer to Jesus, although it is very common for people to look at these activities as self-denial or a type of penance. The most recognizable aspect of lent is the idea of giving something up. For centuries, people all over the world have chosen to give up an indulgence, a food product, or an activity for the period of 40 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. That is why Mardi Gras is such a raucous celebration. It is the last hurrah before the self-imposed denial.

For those who give something up, popular choices include obvious vices like smoking or drinking. Others may go on a diet or try to eliminate certain food, like candy or soda from their diet. Some try to end other habits like watching television or sleeping in. Traditionally, no meat is eaten on Fridays during Lent or on Ash Wednesday, and celebrations and indulgences are kept to a minimum.

The idea behind lent is to leave behind an old habit in favor of newer, healthier habits, whether they are spiritual, emotional or physical. Unfortunately, many people awake on Easter morning, eager to light that first cigarette or dive into a basket full of candy. They may have had various degrees of success in letting go of their old habits for the past several weeks, but by the time the Easter dishes are cleared from the table, they are right back where they started.

If you are in the practice of giving up something for lent, consider doing things a little differently this year. Instead of giving something up, try to commit to a healthier lifestyle by adding exercise to your day, or choosing healthier foods. Don't look at it as denial. Once we think of something as "off limits," we only want more of it. But you are not giving up dessert every night; you are just



exchanging cake and cookies for fruits. You are not giving up your TV time after dinner; you are exchanging it for a walk around the block or a bike ride.

If you are already active, look at ways to expand your workouts. Add more weight to your resistance training. Increase the time for your cardio. Try something you have never tried before.

Don't feel that you need to commit to a marathon or Ironman competition, although those are certainly worthwhile goals. The idea is that you can utilize your time during Lent to change your way of thinking. Little changes like daily exercises and healthier meals are more likely to become big changes when we have the right mindset. You will have more success and will be more likely to stick with something if you think of it in a positive way. It may feel like a penance at first, but don't dwell on that. Taking better care of yourself is one of the healthiest things you can do.

The aspect of prayer and alms giving during Lent can easily be worked into your daily schedule. Be mindful as you prepare your food. Give thanks to God for the food that you have, and for the farmer who grows the food. Prepare your food with love. As you eat each bite of food be mindful of the food and the nourishment it provides, giving gratitude and thanksgiving.

Alms giving need not mean opening your wallet. A kind word, offering a prayer, helping a neighbor, or providing a ride for someone are other examples of alms giving. The whole premise of alms is giving in some way for the well being of another. We normally think of alms giving as giving of our wealth, but it need not be. Even those of limited means can give alms to another by prayers and kindness.

Lent is a time of going within the self and making positive changes.

