

Happy St. Valentine's Day! We do not know a lot about the original St. Valentine beyond the fact that he was a Roman priest and martyr. He lived in a time of moral decline and did what he could to oppose decadent practices - especially Roman customs that drew young people into immoral behaviors. The immorality, which eventually brought ruin to the Roman Empire, was not so different than what surrounds us today: widespread adultery, cohabitation, contraception, abortion, homosexuality and entertainment that featured cruel violence and pornographic displays. St. Valentine stood against this trend and, for his outspoken opposition, corrupt authorities condemned him to death. His feast day is February 14 ("Valentine's Day") and he represents chaste love between friends and above all the beautiful love that leads to the life-long commitment of marriage.



By a nice coincidence, this year Valentine's Day falls on Sunday. In addition to blessing married couples who have anniversaries in February, I will be inviting all married couples to renew their vows. I encourage our couples to do something special today: Go for a walk or have a meal together, take a look at your wedding pictures or - best of all - join hands and say a prayer together. Studies show that couples who pray together (even

something as simple as an "Our Father" or grace before meals) have a much better chance of a lasting, happy marriage.

Speaking of prayer, it was a great pleasure last Sunday to bless the Prayer Line participants. Their names are in the bulletin, so if you have a specific prayer need, contact one of the members or call Kay Faulds directly (her phone number will be regularly in our bulletin).

Prayer is at the heart of the season of Lent, which begins February 17 - Ash Wednesday. The season has three basic "tasks": prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Sometimes people think that these practices are passé, that Jesus has somehow spiritualized everything. For those who have fallen into a vague "spirituality," I ask them to read the Gospel for Ash Wednesday. (Mt 6) Jesus does not say, "If you fast." He says, "When you fast." He does not say, "If you feel like praying." He says, "When you pray." Nor does he say, "Give if you happen to have something extra." No, he says, "When you give alms."



Of the three basics, prayer has first place. Quoting St. Alphonsus, the Catechism states: "Those who pray are certainly saved; those who do not pray are certainly damned." (#2744) Salvation is an eternal relationship with the Triune God in the Communion of Saints. That relationship begins in this life - or it does not begin at all. To use a human comparison: If you desire friendship - that is, a relationship with another human being - you have to do things together, be in each other's presence, talk...and listen. The same applies in our friendship with God. It will not happen automatically. The most important prayer is the Mass. It is the greatest prayer because it renews Jesus' sacrifice which opens heaven to us. After Mass, next in importance is prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. During Lent we might make a resolution to come a few minutes early to Mass and to spend some time in our Blessed Sacrament Chapel. I encourage you during Lent to read a good spiritual book, such as the writings of C.S. Lewis or Peter Kreeft, which will help you focus on God. (Novels can sometimes make good spiritual reading - I am presently caught up in an amazing new novel titled "Fatherless.") Lent is a good time to pray the rosary or take a walk asking the Lord to accompany you. And consider joining the 40 Days for Life (more information below). As Jesus says, don't do it for show - so that people will think what a spiritual person you are - but to grow in your friendship with God.

The second basic practice is fasting. This is tricky for us today. Our culture has so much guilt around food that I am afraid of adding to the guilt, making you feel bad about eating a Big Mac or a plate of linguini. We

should certainly enjoy food and the conviviality that often accompanies a good meal. Nevertheless, we also must find a place for fasting. Until about 1960, every generation of Christians fasted. It's time to return to the practice. I cannot say I am a great example, but I can help you make a start. Give up for Lent some food you particularly enjoy. Cut out eating between meals or - I am speaking for myself now - that snack before bedtime. When I do it, a voice inside says, "Oh no, don't go to bed hungry." But the times I have done it, I survived fine. At a very minimum we must follow the rules of no meat on Ash Wednesday and the seven Fridays of Lent. Although those under fourteen are not strictly bound by the abstinence laws, few children will suffer negative consequences from eating tuna fish or macaroni and cheese instead of hamburgers and fried chicken. Fasting, giving up some favorite food or simply eating less, reminds us that if we are going to get to heaven we must deny immediate impulses, take up our cross and follow Jesus. The goal of fasting is not to have a sleek body one can be proud of. Some saints were quite corpulent, others were virtual skeletons, but they had this in common: They practiced the voluntary self-denial of fasting.

The third Lenten task is almsgiving. This practice, while simple in itself, has some complications today. I honestly do not give to people who show up asking for a handout or to those with cardboard signs at stoplights. It is much better to support a group like St. Vincent de Paul - and of course to support one's parish, the charitable agencies of the archdiocese and to help people in countries like Peru, who experience a form of poverty few of us can imagine. St. John Chrysostom said that after we have satisfied our own basic needs and the needs of those we are directly responsible for, all the rest belongs to the poor: "Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs." (*Homily on Lazarus*) Lent is a time to look at the things on which I spend my money. Do I really need that new book or could I go to the library? How about my other spending habits? Lent is a great time to get rid of the clutter in one's room and one's life. With a bit more organization, I could better serve the needy. We do this not so that people will consider us generous. Someone who gives a single dollar might in reality be more generous than any of us. We give not by human standards, but according to God's generosity. And if we do, our world will not have children living in dire want.

This Sunday we are distributing something very practical to remind us of the three basics. It is a flat piece of cardboard that you can form into a small box called a "Rice Bowl." I ask you to take one, place it on your dining table. Say the prayer on the side - and as you do some voluntary fasting, place in the box what you save. Then bring the Rice Bowl to the church on Easter Sunday. It will help you during Lent to fast, pray and give alms.

As a practical form of prayer, I would like to ask you to do something different for "Mardi-Gras." On Tuesday evening (Feb 16) we will have the kick-off Rally for 40 Days for Life. The Rally begins at 6:30 p.m. at St. Mary Magdalen Church in Everett. Consider signing up for an hour of prayer in front of the Planned Parenthood abortion facility in Everett. You can find more information at: <http://www.40daysforlife.com/Everett/> Also you may talk to our parish contact people: Dom & Alicia Thomeyer in the English community and Oscar & Maria Rodriguez in the Hispanic Community. Abby Jacopo has information on how youth can participate. I invite you to join me in a specific hour of prayer: February 25, 3 to 4 p.m. and/or March 18, also 3 to 4 p.m.

During Lent we will have a membership drive for our parish Knights of Columbus. I encourage all men of our parish to join this fraternal organization. And especially for men, I ask you to set aside March 20 for the annual Spring Clean-Up. We have a lot of work to do on our parish grounds, and we need your help. Ladies of the parish are also welcome to help with the Clean-Up - and I would like to specifically invite you to Mom's Night Out on March 4. It is a wonderful evening, particularly for young moms who are the loving heart of our parish. For all (adults, seniors, youth and children) please be sure our Lenten Generations of Faith evenings are on your calendar (February 24 & March 31). And, while you are marking your calendar, do not forget the goal of our Lenten observance: the celebration of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil. Please guard those three evenings (April 1-3).

Finally, for next weekend: I will have a copy of the Catholic Northwest Progress for every household of our parish. I encourage you to subscribe to our archdiocesan bi-weekly paper. Also please consider a week when you can take the "vocation crucifix" to your home. Especially in this year of prayer for priests we need to promote religious vocations among our young people. And may God bless each of you and your families as we embark on our observance of Lent 2010!