

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Hunger Game: Struggling to Keep the Lenten Fast

I was doing perfectly fine, sitting at the diner, scanning the menu, steadfastly determined to have a tuna melt for lunch, until someone at the table next to me made a fateful decision. They ordered a cheeseburger. It was downhill from there.

It arrived at the table, oozing melted cheese, heaped with French fries, the air fragrant with the faint aroma of just-broiled bacon. My salivary glands kicked into overdrive and before I could stop them, my lips were forming the words: "I'll have the burger deluxe."

Several minutes later, swabbing the ketchup from the plate with the last French fry, I heaved a deep sigh. I found myself once again in an all-too-familiar place, back at square one, trying (and failing) to maintain my Lenten fast. It happens this way almost every year: I begin Lent with noble ambitions and high ideals, ashes on my brow and determination in my heart, but somehow I devolve quickly into Whoppers and pints of Chubby Hubby. (Get thee behind me, Ben & Jerry!)

Year after year, as the winter chill lingers and we wait expectantly for Easter, I am forced, like so many people, to confront my own weaknesses. Lent, I've discovered, is a period not only to pray and do penance; it is also a time to look more deeply at my faults and consider more seriously the temptations that could be as close as the corner deli.

We realize during Lent that we are flesh and blood. The season begins with smears of ash, a foreshadowing of what we will become and a reminder of what we are. We are dust. We are human. We have weaknesses, urges, desires. During the Lenten fast, we realize, too, how easily we can succumb—how spoiled we are by a culture that manages to deliver decadence to our door (okay, maybe it's just a big sausage pizza).

Of course, in 2014 skipping meat on Friday, or even going without one meal, isn't the hardship it once was. I'm trying, like many people, to have a leaner, more sensible diet, so salads and seafood appear on my plate more often. Restaurants, even fast-food chains, are doing their part—places like McDonald's, Taco Bell and Burger King routinely offer fish on their menus during Lent. A little planning, and discipline, can make the Lenten fast fairly painless.

What can be really challenging is giving up entirely a meal or two for a day—or maybe even going without any meal at all. My wife, already in the express lane to sainthood for enduring the man she's married to, strives to eat only bread and water on Lenten Fridays. I marvel at her discipline and her ability to remain cheerful in a world without doughnuts.

I'm not there yet.

But I have come to understand this much: Lent is about more than doing without. It is also about going within—looking more deeply at who we are, what we need. I think part of our Lenten experience should be not only spending time going hungry, but also confronting, in a stark and honest way, what feeds us—in every sense. What do we feel we can't do without? What do we crave?

Beyond a Big Mac, do we yearn for something more elusive? Do we want flattery? Ego-stroking? Attention?

Try giving that up for Lent. You may feel pangs you never knew before.

Sometimes the most difficult fast can be not giving up food, but giving up power or gratification. Try it sometime. Do something wonderful for someone else, and don't claim any credit. Pick up the check of a stranger at the restaurant, or send flowers to a lonely friend, anonymously. Donate to a cause, or give to a shelter, or toss more money into the collection basket on Sunday—but do it in secret.

Your Father, who sees in secret, will know. And that will be more than enough.

When we look beyond ourselves and our own hungers, we see more clearly the very real and tangible hungers of others, and what we can do to ease them.



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