Eating healthy has never been easy for me. Oh, I try. Really, I do. I walk past Krispy Kreme doughnuts and avert my eyes. I cross the street to avoid Burger King. I see a Cinnabon shop at the mall and pray “Lead me not into temptation.”

In my universe, the two most dangerous people on the planet, the dietary axis of evil, are Ben and Jerry. Sometimes, I give in to temptation—curse you, Johnny Rocket!—but generally, I’m getting better at avoiding junk. My wife has become adept at making even healthy food beguiling. Thanks to her, I actually look forward to fish.

Which, according to the rules of the church, is the way it is supposed to be.

Giving up is really about giving; it is denying something we love, as an act of silent sacrifice.

Later that same year, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States wrote that, because meat had become so commonplace a food, another means of abstinence might be more meaningful.

The NCCB decided to “terminate the traditional law of abstinence as binding under pain of sin.” Other means of abstinence are acceptable on Fridays, the bishops wrote. But they then added: “We give first place to abstinence from flesh meat.”

The NCCB suggested that every Friday should be like a “little Lent,” just as every Sunday is a “little Easter,” and therefore should be, in some way, a day of self-denial and mortification in prayerful remembrance of the passion of Jesus Christ.”

The bottom line: Faithful Catholics are still asked to give up something on Friday. (Sorry: broccoli doesn’t count.) And going meatless is still, after all these centuries, a good idea.

The church teaches that any prayerful sacrifice will inevitably enrich the soul, and help redeem the world. (Some Catholics give up things on Friday for a specific intention: for an end to abortion, perhaps, or for peace.)

As we approach Advent—a season of preparation and penitence—perhaps more of us should revisit the ancient idea of abstinence, and embrace it. The church admonishes us to do it every week. Do we?

Giving up is really about giving; it is denying something we love, as an act of silent sacrifice. A skipped lunch or a missed movie can be a kind of prayer—a canticle of contrition. Eating salmon could be considered a psalm.

So, this Friday, try a little fish.

Just for the halibut.

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