



MAKING LENT

MEANINGFUL TO CHILDREN



By CYNDI MONTANARO

On Ash Wednesday, we heard Christ teaching his disciples how to do penance (Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18). He focused on three traditional areas for penance in Jewish life. These are fasting, almsgiving and prayer.

How [might we] apply these principles to our school-age children's lives? What can we do to teach them (not force them) to do penance for the love of Christ?

Fasting

C. S. Lewis makes a very interesting point about gluttony in *The Screwtape Letters*. He points out other types of gluttony besides overeating.

These include being overly concerned about what, when and how we eat. For our children, this translates into refusing to eat anything but pizza and doughnuts, or, in the less extreme cases, into a strong dislike for vegetables.

Let's encourage our children, instead of doing the obvious, giving up sweets, to try to overcome one of their food aversions. Make sure they understand that this change should be from the heart, and should not be done grudgingly. If it is done well, it will be a true penance which will have a lasting benefit. Be sure they understand that it's not necessary to like the food, only to overcome their dislike of it enough to eat it. Because of our fallen human nature, we can't always control our likes and dislikes, and God doesn't expect this superhuman ability from us. He does expect us to bring obedience to the table.

Almsgiving (Earning Money for the Poor)

All good Christians know that we must give money to the poor. But children don't earn any money. We may give them a few coins to put in the collection basket at church. But does this truly help them to understand the concept of almsgiving, or do they view it as just a game?

During Lent, most Catholic churches participate in Operation Rice Bowl. At the beginning of Lent, you probably received a small cardboard box with various scenes of third world destitution on it. You were asked to make little offerings on behalf of the hungry throughout the season.

This year, instead of simply giving your children money to put in the box, let them earn that money. Get several rolls of nickels, dimes or quarters from your local bank. Post a chart on your refrigerator listing amounts they will be "paid" if they do certain household chores. They might earn a nickel for emptying the dishwasher, or a dime if they do so before they are asked to. The older child, who has a paper route, or mows the neighbor's lawn each week should be encouraged to share his earnings with those less fortunate than himself.

Prayer

Nearly every canonized saint who did not undergo a deathbed conversion, had an intimate prayer relationship with God. But how did they achieve it? Many saints, from their earliest years, were taught by their parents to pray. The prayers themselves may have been simple ones such as our "Angel of God" prayer, or the "Hail Mary." But the faith and attention with which these prayers are said make a tremendous difference to a child.

As parents, we encourage the development of our children's prayer life first and foremost through example. Let them see us praying often and with outward signs of piety. Don't assume that if you are slouched over in the pew your child will get the message that you are truly in love with Our Lord. The child is a very concrete person. Outward actions help him understand interior disposition (which he cannot see).

In addition to vocal prayer, the saints reached great heights of intimacy in mental prayer. While this may not have happened when they were children, the groundwork was often laid at an early age. Catholic meditation is based upon a mental picture. For example, one who is meditating on the crucifixion, forms a mental picture of that event, and then, striving to empty his mind of all distraction, concentrates the imagination.

This is a tall order for a third grader. A child often is not able to paint that mental picture. Here is where you, the parent, come in.

Take some time with your child, perhaps 15 minutes on a Sunday afternoon, and choose a mystery of the rosary. Take the child in your arms (your touch will help to focus his whole being on what you are saying), and describe to him a scene from the life of Christ. Then ask him what he thinks about when he puts this picture in his mind. Try and guide him toward a dialogue with Christ rather than simply with you. You might say to him, "What would you say to baby Jesus and his mother Mary if you saw them in Bethlehem?" If you can help your child to develop the habit of interior conversation, you will have gotten him on the road to sanctity.

Montanaro, Cyndi. "Kids and Holiness: Making Lent Meaningful to Children." *National Catholic Register*, Catholic Education Resource Center: <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/kids-and-holiness-making-lent-meaningful-to-children.html>.