

Launching into Lent
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Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

We all wish that the world was more orderly. Less confusing. A calm place where there is harmony. We will wait out the chaos before trusting ourselves to institutions: adult education, marriage, government, political parties, parish councils, school boards. The problem is, the craziness will outlive us, and we will have used it as an excuse not to live at all.

Lent pulls us back from wanting to fix everyone and everything. It invites us to enter its traditional discipline of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. A disciple is one who is always in the posture of a learner at Jesus' feet. That explains the heart of the three-part discipline. Lent brings our relationship with Jesus into focus, to ground it, deepen it or reconcile it.

We can be creative with our discipline, personally inventive or joining in shared efforts. Prayer is putting ourselves in God's presence, asking what (or who) God wants us to respond to in the moment. There are plenty of devotional books to choose from. St. Ambrose said that the Psalms are a gymnasium for the soul. You may prefer to choose your workout from another part of the Scriptures.

Fasting (not abstaining altogether) from food provokes meditations that otherwise would escape us. I am reading more these days about the good that happens when one fasts from so much social media. Or not checking our mobile devices when sharing a meal. If you hold a phone to your ear while driving a child someplace, you have a couple of reasons to practice a tech-fast.

Almsgiving gets us outside of ourselves. Generally speaking, getting out is, according to Pope Francis, a necessity for a living faith and a living parish. Giving alms is not simply donating to a charity, but to a person or cause that aids materially disadvantaged people who lack adequate food, safe shelter or clothing. The intention to give alms does not just help poor persons, it opens our eyes and hearts to their very existence. Here, too, we can choose our own project. But I am always partial to the "Rice Bowl" campaign of Catholic Relief Services that benefits people in our own locale as well as overseas. This effort wraps all the Lenten disciplines together as you can see when you go to www.crsricebowl.org/