

[Readings: Gen. 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Ps. 116; Rom. 8:31b-34; Mk. 9:2-10]

Let's have a show of hands: Who gave up something for Lent this year? For many Catholics, the Lenten sacrifice is part and parcel of these 40 days. It's another reason to wear penitential purple: 40 days without chocolate. Without dessert. Without coffee. Without TV or electronics for one day a week!

But we know that sacrifice doesn't necessarily involve the rejection of material things. This year, some of us may be giving up gossip or using cuss words or spending the evening criticizing others or complaining. These are good practices that hopefully will take root in Lent and become standard behavior during the Easter season and beyond. Some people may have decided to go all out and give up large sums of money in a generous show of Christian charity. We could use more of those! Have you seen our weekly support reports?

But some folks have given up on "giving up" as a spiritual practice. They are trying instead to do something positive and proactive: spending more time in prayer or with their kids, or caring for their health in exercise or pledging involvement with social concerns. The "giving up" business focused too hard on the negative for these people, and they are trying a new approach to the disciplines of Lent.

What if we stopped thinking of ourselves altogether? What if we gave up thinking about Lent as a kind of moral self-improvement program and considered the root meaning of the word sacrifice?

**Sacrifice** shares a root with the word **sacred**. A sacrifice is an act that makes one holy -- that is, a sharer in the nature of God. Every religious tradition includes sacrificial practices intended to bring worshipers closer to the Divine. The goal is not to become better people but to experience union with God. All ancient sacrifice involved offering a gift of some kind, and the gift invariably was alive. Life, understood to reside in the blood, was offered to God because it is the most precious thing there is. Every sacrifice therefore consisted of an animal sacrifice, plus grains and "first fruits" to set a full banquet before the Lord.

When the blood was poured, sprinkled, or splashed against the altar, the sacrifice was considered complete. Human sacrifices, rare even in ancient cultures, fell into the category of whole burnt offerings. The ultimate gift was rendered to God as a testimony of perfect confidence and praise.

Every parent I know shrinks at the story of Abraham and Isaac in the land of Moriah. What kind of father agrees to sacrifice his child to God in cold blood, under any conceivable circumstances? It does not help matters to point out that God sent an angel at the last minute to stop the sacrifice, nor to compare this event with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. No parent, the compassionate heart insists, should be called upon to kill his or her child. Period.

This event is a test of Abraham's character before God. The story was most likely told to later generations as an example of **God's** character before humanity. The God of Abraham had higher dreams for human life than to simply see it splashed against an altar.

You might remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff. When he first came to the United States from Russia he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk -- you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice -- you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, "What a country!"

Smirnoff is joking, but we make these assumptions about Christian transformation -- that people change instantly at salvation. Some traditions call it repentance and renewal. Some call it sanctification of the believer. Whatever you call it, most traditions expect some quick fix to sin. According to this belief, when someone gives his or her life to Christ, there is an immediate, in-depth, miraculous change in habits, attitudes, and character. Unfortunately, some of us come to church as if we are going to the grocery store as a consumer looking for the Powdered Christian mix. Just add water, and instant disciples!

Unfortunately, there is no such powder, and disciples of Jesus Christ are not instantly born. They are slowly raised through many trials, suffering, and temptations. A study has found that only 11 percent of churchgoing teenagers

have a well-developed faith, rising to only 32 percent for churchgoing adults. Why? Because true-life change only begins at salvation, takes more than just time, and is about training, trying, suffering, and even dying (adapted from James Emery White, *Rethinking the Church*, Baker, 1997, p. 55-57).

"Beloved sons" abound in this Sunday's readings, and God is moving in big ways around them. In the end Abraham did not have to sacrifice his beloved son -- though he was willing to -- but either way it's a harrowing story. Saint Paul invokes a God whose support for us is seen in the handing over of God's own Son, thereby causing our fears to crumble. And once again we hear, "This is my beloved Son," a "secret" too great to be kept entirely hidden.

Have I ever had to sacrifice something dear to me for a greater good?  
How did this sacrifice enrich my relationship with God?

As much as anything, today's scripture is about faith – the willingness to follow God's command, really believing God is for us, gradually coming to realize glory will also involve the cross. Do I respond to God's call as readily as Abraham? Does God give me strength? Am I willing to walk the road of suffering in order to reach true fulfillment? What am I letting separate me from God?

Have you seen the T-shirt that says, "God's not finished with me yet?" Whatever situation we're in, we must have faith that the unfolding of God's will for us is not complete. More will be revealed, and it will be revealed in the day-to-day activities of our lives -- in our homes and workplaces, at school and within our families. Lent is a time to become aware of both the great revelations and the small. God wants something from us, and it may not be what we think. And surely God has more in mind for us, too. For most, discovering God's will for us will not come in a blinding flash of light, but rather in the small acts of love and generosity we practice right in our daily lives. AMEN!