

I don't know what to do for Lent. Suggestions?

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Q: I want to do something for Lent, but I never know what. I have a hard time sticking with things. Do you have any suggestions?

A: Do I have any suggestions? Absolutely I do.

First, let me tell you a little tale So, way back in 2020, there was this thing we were all introduced to called a “global pandemic.” (You might have heard about it, it was in all of the newspapers.) Kidding aside, this has been devastating in so many ways for so many people. Not only have people lost their lives, their livelihood, their family members and friends, but our world has been thrust into a whole new set of challenges we will need to work out for a long time to come.

Well, when the lockdowns first happened, I was quite distressed that I wouldn't be able to connect with our students. (I live and work on a college campus and didn't even get to say goodbye to them as all of this began while they were away on Spring Break.) So I started to

livestream our Sunday Mass so that we were able to have some form of contact with our students and to try and provide some sense of prayer for those who were suddenly unable to pray the Mass in person.

Now, while there is no shortage of opinions about the helpfulness of online Masses, it has turned out to be a good thing for most of the people who “attended” and prayed with us. We also discovered that there were a few other people who were unable to get to Mass who appreciated being able to tune in and pray.

So, we realized that we needed a different camera, since the one we first used didn’t really do the job. After a while, it turned out that the sound quality was kind of hit-or-miss, so we needed to figure out a different way to capture the sound. Then we realized that, if we were going to continue with the online Mass for those who have remained isolated and shut in (for any reason, whether that be the decisions of their governments or because they simply happened to be sick that week), we would need to get a different system for broadcasting.

Over the course of two years, this has meant trying something different about every four to six months.

Now, for some people, this might be a frustrating reality. They could think to themselves, “I thought that we had already solved this problem! We made a decision and simply need to stick with it!” That might be something that I have been tempted to think as well. But I was recently speaking with some of the folks who have helped us in this process. They are video and audio engineers, producers, and technicians who deal with filming and broadcasting on a regular basis. And they didn’t see this as “failure.” In fact, they had another word to describe what we were doing: “iterate.”

They didn’t see the fact that we were needing to regularly reevaluate and change what we were doing as an indication of failure. They looked at it all with the perspective that this was part of what they called the “iterative process.” Aside from sounding cool and intellectual, the “iterative process” is recognizing that life is rarely a “set it and forget it” venture. To “iterate” is to repeat over and over. The “iterative process” is an ongoing method of building, refining, and improving a project. It is “alive” in a sense.

Let’s bring this to our approach to Lent.

For many of us, we want to decide what we are going to do and then simply stick with it throughout the next 40 days. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, it could be a virtuous way to move forward. Committing and sticking with one’s commitments can be a great exercise in virtue. But there is also the approach that Lent gets to be an iterative process.

For example, say that you have noticed that there are certain things in your life that have become obstacles to your relationship with God. Maybe your decision of what to sacrifice for Lent involves one or more of these things. Maybe you’ve noticed that time spent on social

media takes up the time you are being called to spend in prayer (or more focused on your work or the people around you) so you decide to eliminate social media for Lent.

But then, as Lent goes along, you realize that the actual “time and attention thief” was YouTube. Now, you could say, “But I decided to give up social media, so I’ll just stick with that.” Or you could iterate. You could recognize that watching all of those videos on YouTube was the real source of distraction and avoidance and make the decision to pivot. In other words, you could allow the season of Lent to be an exercise in the iterative process.

Lent is classically the season of “purification and enlightenment.” We know that purification is a process. We know that enlightenment (aka “learning”) is a process. Doesn’t that leave at least a little bit of room to allow our Lenten practices this year to also be a process?

That is my suggestion. If something is working, there’s no need to mess with it. But if this Lent reveals the opportunity to change, then do not be afraid to iterate.