

By Pat Haggerty

One of my favorite hymns of all time is “Hosea” by the monks of Weston Priory. It is based on the words of the prophet Joel: “Even now says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God.”

These are our instructions for Lent as directed to us in the first reading for Ash Wednesday. It is very clear as to what we should be doing for the next forty days. I don’t think we have to go around weeping and mourning, though. In fact, Matthew warns us about the outward appearance of our actions and sacrifices. In his gospel we read: “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father.”

So, what do we need to do then? What is our blueprint for a good Lent? The gospel for Ash Wednesday reminds us of three things---almsgiving, praying and fasting. Certainly, these acts form the basis of our Lenten observances. There is another one, though, that I would like to add. It is reflecting. That is really at the heart of what we ultimately do during our Lenten journey.

Even before we think of what we are going to do for Lent or what we are going to give up, we need to reflect. We need to ask ourselves, “What can I do that will help me return to the Lord?” Maybe ours is not so much a returning but a reigniting of our flame of love for the Lord. It is like taking a vacation to recharge ourselves so that we can continue with the hectic pace of life.

Lent is the time afforded to us to recharge our religious batteries, so that we can take a different approach to our spirituality. It is our chance to deepen our faith, enliven our commitment to God and strengthen our bonds with our neighbor. It is a wonderful opportunity to return to God with our whole heart.

We are a people of great diversity and uniqueness. That is what God wanted us to be. In light of that, our approach to Lent is not a one size fits all formula. We need to consider what the best fit is for us. Is it spending more time in prayer? Is it contributing to our local food pantry? Is it working in that food pantry? Is it attending daily Mass? Each one of us has to decide on our most helpful pathway.

No matter the pathway, reflection must be at its core. Reflection will help us to return to the Lord. We will find our true longing. As we sing in “Hosea”: “Long have I waited for your coming home to me and living deeply our new life.”