

Reflection on Lent and Lenten Practices.

I grew up in India, in a very devout Catholic family and educated in “Convent School” as they called Catholic girls schools those days.

I had my “Baltimore Catechism” memorized and followed all the liturgical practices of the Catholic Church, like a “good” Catholic convent educated girl.

I followed a lot of it because that was what was expected of me as a “good” Catholic and not because I fully understood it or cared deeply. I may have even resented it at times, but the Fourth Commandment was not something we dared to break too often. We learned to obey our parents and the nuns, our teachers.

Today, I must say I am so thankful to my dear parents and my Good Shepherd nuns for having instilled into me traditions and tenets of my Catholic faith along with the devotions, prayers and practices, which I hold very dear to my heart.

Lent was a season filled with many such practices. The 3 pillars of the Lenten season, “Prayer Fasting and Almsgiving” was something I did not quite look forward to, because of what I had to give up. There was one thing, that my siblings and I did not like “giving up” for Lent and that was, listening to the “Sunday Hit Parade of Songs” on the big family radio (which was the size of a small TV). Lent was a season of everything being toned down and that meant no loud music at home. We had to “fast” from the radio. Believe me when I say, that giving up chocolates and candy pale in comparison to giving up hearing the voice of Elvis or Jim Reeves on a Sunday morning. We could not wait for Easter morn to sing Alleluia, because we could turn the radio back on!

PRAYER was a very important part of our family life, growing up. We said our “Morning Offering” by our bedside and we knelt together as a family to pray the rosary each night and we said our grace before meals. Some nights I loved praying and other nights the devil won and could not wait for night prayers to be over.

In Lent, more prayers and practices were added to our daily routine. We attended daily Mass, went to confession once a week, Stations of the Cross on Fridays, no meat most days, and the highlight each Saturday was attending the Lenten Mission at Holy Ghost Church (my parish), preached by the Redemptorist priests. The priests, who were mostly Irish gave lengthy fiery sermons. I loved their Irish accent, which they did not lose even though they lived most of their lives in India and they sure rubbed off on the Indian priests, who also gave their long fiery sermons with an Irish accent! Other than those sermons transmitted over the loudspeakers, everything else in Church during Lent was quiet, somber, solemn and austere. The statues were all covered in purple cloth and everyone left Church quietly and spoke only in hushed voices.

Ove the years I learned to pray with less words and more from the heart. Prayer now is not something that I have to do but something my heart desires to do. It is an integral part of my daily life. My life would be empty without prayer.

FASTING, meant giving up and like I said giving up listening to the radio was the hardest thing we had to do in Lent as kids. We also gave up sweets and desserts and

followed the Church's rules of fasting. Though the requirement of fasting in Lent for Catholics seemed tough I admired my Muslim friends who fasted all day without even swallowing their spit during their holy season of fast.

Fasting has taken on a new meaning for me, because I now know that it is not so much

about the rules or giving up candy or favorite foods but it is more about fasting from selfishness, from being unkind, from pride, from judging, from hurtful words, from prejudice, from racism and it is about practicing humility, kindness, gratitude for blessings and acceptance of all as children of God.

Giving up candy is a lot easier at this stage of my life, but the other forms of fasting are a challenge, that I constantly work at.

ALMSGIVING was something Catholics in India practiced all the time and more so in Lent. Like in the Biblical days, the roads leading to our churches were lined with beggars, the blind, the lame and lepers too. We always dropped coins into their plates on our way to Church and during Lent we were more generous in our almsgiving. We also had little tins with a slit on the top (like the rice bowls here) where we collected our change to give to the poor and we took pride in making sacrifices and earning money to put into our tins.

A tradition that my parents followed was to feed a poor family on the Feast of St. Joseph which invariably fell during Lent and that was a practice that we looked forward to as a family.

Our St. Julia Parish Vincent De Paul volunteers who distribute food to so many needy families, reminds me of my family's Lenten practice.

Holy Week was extra solemn, and we spent a lot of time in Church.

On **Holy Thursday**, which we called Maundy Thursday, our family reenacted the Seder Supper, where my Dad blest and broke unleavened bread, with a cross on it made from the palms of Palm Sunday. He dipped the bread in a milk-based porridge and distributed it to all the family members. I loved that tradition, so we carried it on over the years with our children growing up. Our kids love this tradition too, so hopefully it will carry on for another generation.

Good Friday, believe it or not, was a national holiday in India which is a Hindu dominated country. A lot of the day was spent in Church praying and fasting and in the evening, we had a traditional Good Friday meal of rice soup with lentils. We still eat that meal to this day on Good Friday.

Easter was a time of great celebration and joy. Attending Mass wearing new clothes and shoes was a highlight. Hot, cross buns were a special treat, and we also enjoyed a lot of other Indian traditional foods.

As I grew up, got married, came to Boston and raised our family here, I realized how important were those seeds of faith, tradition, and religious practices that my parents sowed.

I, as an adult embraced my faith whole heartedly and the Lenten practices became more meaningful to me and an important part of my life. I am grateful that my parents sowed and nurtured those seeds in me, which by the grace of the Holy Spirit blossomed and grew in me.

30 years ago, we moved to Weston and in the beginning we felt sad that we had to leave our former Parish and were not too sure that St. Julia Parish was where we were called to be.

That first Lent at St. Julia was very special, because it became clear that this is where we were meant to be. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Deacon Tom Walsh from St John XXIII Seminary, who was helping out at St Julia, came up to us and invited us as a family to be the Cross bearers and lead the Stations of the Cross. We were humbled and honored at that invitation.

Little did he know that his kind gesture made us feel so welcome and we then knew that

St. Julia Parish was going to be our home for years to come and that we would celebrate many Lenten seasons in this Parish. That tradition of inviting a new family to lead the Stations was carried on for many years after.

Our family still observe many of the Lenten practices and traditions that we grew up with.

We started a tradition some 35 years ago, of praying the Stations of the Cross once a week with some of our Indian Catholic friends and celebrating Easter together and we still continue that tradition with our children and grandchildren.

My understanding of prayer, fasting and almsgiving has surely matured and taken on a deeper meaning over the years. Lent to me is a special time of reflection, a time to refresh and renew. It is a time to sweep out the cobwebs hiding in the corners of your heart, a time of repentance and forgiveness, and a time of rejoicing at the Resurrection.

Like our parents did, Prem and I hope that we too have sown the seeds of faith and tradition and the importance of devotions and Lenten practices in our children. At times when I doubt if we did all we could to raise our children in the Catholic faith, I take hope in the words of

Fr. Joseph Casey who said, *“your job as parents, is to sow the seeds and nurture it and then you have to leave it to them to blossom and grow in their faith and embrace it as their own. “*

Thank you, Father Casey for those words of wisdom.

May this Lenten season be a fruitful time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving and may it bring us to the joy of Easter as we celebrate the Risen Lord. Alleluia!