

## Giving Up Something for Lent

When the discussion about Lent comes up in the classroom, the following question is unavoidable: "What are you giving up for Lent?" Children, who love to set grandiose goals, often deny themselves candy, soda, potato chips or other favorite treats. Older Catholics see Lent as the perfect time to start a diet, stop smoking or overcome another bad habit. Such goals are admirable, but the real reason behind giving up something during Lent is much more about reordering the soul than the menu.

Fasting is meant to imitate the 40 days Jesus fasted from food in the desert. Fasting helps us put aside everything and devote ourselves to God's presence. It isn't so much about cleaning up our bad habits as it is thinking of ourselves less and becoming more aware of God. As a penitential practice, fasting should always be coupled with prayer and good works. In *Catholic Traditions: Treasures New and Old*, Joanne Turpin explains, "Fasting is not meant to be life-denying, but rather to be understood as freeing one from worldly attachments...." This book is an excellent resource for explaining the reasons for Catholic traditions to young believers. Turpin says, "Traditions are the threads that tie together succeeding generations of believers." So it is with the tradition of fasting. When students catch on to the spirit of the tradition, it will strengthen their faith in the practice.

Plan to take some class time before Lent or in the first days of Lent to talk about the penitential traditions of the season. Explain how the customs of increasing fasting, prayer, good works and almsgiving make up a working team that guides us back to putting God first in our lives. Then it is time to develop a Lenten program for your class. Let the students discuss how they can meet the criteria of each of the four disciplines of the season. Here are a few ideas:

\* **Proclaim a Matthew 25 Fast** – Each student chooses one of the verses of Matthew 25 and develops a fast based on feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, etc.

\* **The Fasting Jar** – Place a large jar on the class prayer table. The students are encouraged to find ways to save money by fasting from carryout lunches, snacks, soda, etc. The money saved is placed in the jar and given to the poor. One industrious class went one step farther, agreeing that those caught complaining or talking with disrespect would be obliged to put a quarter in the fasting jar.

\* **The Purple Paper Chain** – At the beginning of Lent, each student is given a supply of purple paper (1" x 5"). Whenever a student completes an act of fasting or does a good deed, he or she writes a description of the act on the paper. The class creates a daily paper chain with the purple papers. The object is to create a Lenten chain that surrounds the walls of the classroom or the hallways by Easter.

\* **A Rock in My Pocket** – On Ash Wednesday, pass out rocks (small enough to fit in a pocket) to all students. Tell students to write on the rocks one word to describe their fast and to carry the rocks throughout Lent. On Good Friday, the rocks are placed at the foot of the cross during veneration.