

Lead us not into temptation

Every Lent, I sacrifice at least two things. First of all, I give up snacking. Now, that is tough especially when you have wonderful parishioners bringing you their freshly baked and wonderful treats to enjoy with a tea break. Those of us who are used to being tea-drinkers always have something edible to enjoy with a cup of tea. So, it is a bit of a sacrifice to sit there and just sip a cup of tea.

Secondly, I give up watching any television during Lent. I am not programmed to watch reality shows or weekly series. Usually I watch local and national news as well as news specials. So, when I retire to my sitting room at the end of the day, what do I do with my time until bedtime? Well, I settle down in my recliner and read a good book. With a highlighter close at hand, I pick my way through a book, noting things that may stimulate my brain and get me into a more reflective mood. Obviously, there is only so much reading one can do at the time before the brain asks for a hiatus. One of the by-products of engaging in reading is that one is ushered to bed earlier than usual without any television to distract one.

Why do I do the above for Lent? Maybe it is because it is different and I can fill the space with better nourishment for mind and body. Maybe, too, it is discipline and self-control and an opportunity to put down a finish line to aim for at the end of Lent.

We live in a world of instant gratification. I am amazed at how early in life we learn the drive to adopt the “I want...” mentality. Frequently, I notice children in stores punish their parents with crying, embarrassment and public humiliation because the parents refuse to buy them everything they want.

One of the books I read this Lent is called, “We have met the Enemy – Self-control in an Age of Excess” by Daniel Akst. The outside cover shows a chocolate donut covered in sprinkles. A lit fuse protrudes from the top. It is an apt reflection on the topic.

Akst reflects on how hard it is for us to have self-control in our present environment. He also tries to decipher the psychology that drives us away from self-control.

He says that we live in a country that resembles a “giant all-you-can-eat buffet, one that offers more calories, credit, sex, intoxicants, and just about anything else we can take to excess than at any time in history. We may vow, as we load up our plates, to start on a diet tomorrow, but tomorrow the buffet is still here. And when tomorrow comes, we’re still hungry.”

He indicates that when it comes to self-control, it is not so much will power as vision which is the ability to see the future so that the long-term consequences of our short-term choices are vividly clear.

He mentions that people who know the risks involved in having no self-control include the implications of smoking, overweight, and suicide. We have the best intentions to diet, exercise, be temperate, be faithful but still we succumb to temptations. We seem to have a predisposition toward overconfidence and so tend to be naïve about the strength of our willpower. Procrastination seems to be another excuse for not saying “yes” to self-control. He says that the “collapse of delay between impulse and action, between offer and decision, inevitably privileges impulse over reflection and now over later. By undermining deliberation, speed weakens the habit of deferring gratification and leaves no chance for second thoughts.”

With the advent of the Internet, now we don’t have to wait for anything. We can have home delivery of any product or human consumption almost instantly. We are more obsessed with personal fulfillment, looking for something new rather than living with discontent. In the past, with the aid of religion, the notion of an afterlife encouraged future-mindedness and so people deferred gratification. Now, the growth of secularism changed that equation.

Maybe it is still a good idea to have Lent to allow us take a long and hard look at the idea of self-control. It challenges us to look a little deeper at our desire to have instant gratification without thinking about the implications of the consequences and replace it with the self-discipline that will make us more human.

Maybe that’s enough self-control right now. My watch tells me it is time to stop and have a cup of tea sans any goodies.