

A.M.D.G.

Homily for Ash Wednesday Mass 2018, year B

“Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God.”

I was asking around about what students were doing for Lent. Some ideas were noteworthy: giving up putting Hersey’s chocolate syrup on choco-krispies; or limiting gaming to 4 hours a day instead of the usual 6 or more; or giving up binge watching Netflix series, with binge watching here being defined as at least 5 consecutive episodes. Now, these are all praiseworthy sacrifices, certainly very meritorious, but perhaps there is more to Lent than such practices. Perhaps we can go a little deeper into the meaning of these forty days that Holy Mother Church sets aside for our benefit.

The prophet Joel offers us a powerful description of the essence of Lent: *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.* I do not know if giving up the Hershey’s chocolate syrup quite captures the essence of these prophetic words. If we take an honest look at ourselves, I think that we often find that we serve less God and more our own pleasures, or our Snapchat streaks, or our social media personas, or our own pride and selfishness. Lent is a time to turn back to God, to turn away from our sins, be converted, *metanioia*. How do we go about doing this?

You spend so much time here at SLUH practicing and improving yourself as writers, artists, musicians, athletes, Kahoot players. I see the teams in the weight room, in the gym, on the soccer field. I hear the band and the choir throughout the day, see the Prep News team working away in the J wing. We work to improve in these areas, and many more, every day. But how much time do we work to improve our souls? What training do we do for that?

So I have a challenge for you this Lent. It does not involve ice buckets or 5k runs. It comes from the spiritual arsenal St. Ignatius. It is a very effective spiritual training program that he calls the particular Examen. He suggests that, similar to our workouts, we focus on overcoming one particular sin at a time. First, choose a habitual sin that you have. I challenge you to focus on something big, something that really weighs on your conscience: fighting with your parents, lying

and cheating, selfishness, pornography and masturbation, drug use. Take on something serious. Then ask the Lord every morning for help in overcoming that sin. Then during the day rend your heart not to fall into the sin. Use the daily school Examen to look back over the previous 24 hours and count the number of times you have fallen into that one sin. St. Ignatius actually suggests that you keep count, so as to recognize the progress. Ask for forgiveness for the failures. Thank the Lord for the successes. And persevere in the practice for 40 days. See what happens.

Why bother? Perhaps you are asking. Why bother with such spiritual rigors? I will give you two reasons. Well first of all, we should do it to prove wrong that destructive lie that we can't be any better. We will always have that sin. That is nonsense. We can be better. We can be spectacular. Each one of you can soar to the heights of human existence and become one of the most amazing human beings that has ever lived, with Christ's help. There is nothing more exciting to do, or more rewarding, than to struggle with all our soul to become a perfected son or daughter of God.

But that is not the most important reason for doing it. Why do we train in the weight room? We train to get stronger, so that we can win the game. We want to win the game. The same is true here. We engage in spiritual practices such as the particular examen in order to better our souls so that we can win the game. What is the game? The game is Good Friday. It is to be able to stay with the Lord Jesus during his suffering and death, to enter into the passion. That is the game. I don't know if you have ever tried being there, but it is not easy. We want to run away. We want to ignore it, we don't want to see someone suffer for us, and we don't want suffer with Him. Yet, anyone who has lived deeply enough knows that suffering is the ultimate test of the human soul, and the greatest act of love and fidelity is to be able to accompany someone through that. That is what Jesus invites us to do with him, not for the sake of the suffering, but because, paradoxically, it is only through that suffering that we come to new life. It is only by dying with Christ that we can rise with Him in the resurrection.

So this Lent I challenge us all to *Rend our hearts, and return to the Lord, our God* through the practice of the particular examen. Hopefully this Good Friday we will be able to be with the Lord on Calvary, and looking around us see our SLUH brothers standing with us.