

MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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Doing Away With Masks (the invisible kind...)

**Beware of practicing your
piety before others in
order to be seen by them
(Matthew 6:1).**



Dear Mission Friends:

Why do we do what we do? Do you ever think much about the real motivation behind your actions? If you were a fan of the TV show *Seinfeld*, you may remember the episode when George takes back the tip he has left in the barista's jar because she wasn't looking when he put it in. What good would it do, he thought, if he wasn't going to get any credit for it?

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), a professor and a prolific writer of over thirty books and countless essays reaching audiences of all ages (*Mere Christianity; The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*), famously said, **"Integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching."** Sadly, integrity is rare. I would venture to say that for most of us, while our hearts may be in the right place, there is usually some ulterior motive behind our actions.



As seen in Jesus's warning (in the opening quote), such ulterior motives are as old as time. It has always been the rare person who does the right thing simply for the sake of doing the right thing, but it seems especially true today, in this era of virtue-signaling, status-seeking, and social media judging. Even as I write this, I am conceitedly wondering who will be reading it and thinking how right or interesting I am.

Take the sacrifices we choose to make during Lent. Lent commemorates the forty days Jesus fasted in the desert—continuously praying and fighting temptation—in preparation for his public ministry and ultimately his divine sacrifice for us. As Catholics we are called to prepare for Easter by following his example—making sacrifices that require a constant struggle against our own temptations (and doing so for the right reasons.)

Continuing with Matthew 6, Jesus advised, "When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others...do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray...that they may be seen by men... and when you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting..."(2-5,16).

Like the hypocrites Jesus was referring to, our motives for our chosen Lenten practices—whether fasting or giving up an activity or going to Mass every morning or saying the rosary every night—are usually fraught with the hope of added benefits and are rarely pure. Like in the Bible passage, some of us hope to impress others by



touting their sacrifices, whether on Facebook or even just to friends; some of us hope to be rewarded for pleasing the Lord; some take great pride in sticking to their sacrifices in spite of strong temptations. Other popular motives specifically for fasting, abstinence, or “giving up” a favorite food or habit—alcohol or chocolate or Facebook are common culprits—include hoping to lose weight or save money or add time to the day. Indeed, it’s not uncommon to hear Lent being welcomed as an opportunity for a 40-day fitness challenge or a social media “cleanse.” In addition, knowing that our sacrifices, while perhaps difficult, are doable and temporary diminishes our struggle. We can’t wait for Easter Sunday when they come to an abrupt halt and we can return to our self-indulgent habits until the next year. Indeed, as Pope Francis says, every year Lent must “reawaken us,..shake us from our lethargy.”

But Lent is not about making ourselves feel better. It should not be about ourselves at all. Just as Jesus’s sacrifice was made to cleanse our souls and not his,



our sacrifice must be made to ease others’ troubles, not merely our own. Jesus came here to be crucified in order to remove our minds from gross concerns and blind commitment to the goods of this world and so to awaken our hearts to the sentiment of compassion for the suffering of life. **True sacrifice then should help us realize how narrow and self-centered our concerns can be; it should help us look beyond ourselves and see the needs of others more clearly—**others whose burdens are so much heavier than ours: the majority of the world’s population who live on a handful of rice every day, the 800+ million who go to bed hungry each night, those whose fasting is an inescapable way of life, not just 40 but 365 days a year.

According to Pope Francis, if our self-denial is an end in itself and does not show compassion and enrich another, it is “fake fasting.” That is not to say that we should altogether give up fasting or any of the other traditional Lenten observances such as praying and almsgiving, but we must continuously and honestly examine our motives and strive to make them less about ourselves and more about others. If practiced authentically and not as robotic rituals, these observances can be a stabilizing force, strengthening our faith and restoring our true sense of purpose.

Another such traditional observance is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, which is meant to serve as a clear and humbling reminder of our mortality. While hearing—truly listening to—the priest say, “Know that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” as he draws a cross of ashes on our forehead, we are meant to meditate on the passion of Christ and join in his suffering. And on a Friday, if we attend the Stations of the Cross and pay close attention to the readings, we witness how Jesus responded to his sufferings with uncompromising forgiveness and love. We should come to realize that the best way to prepare for Easter is to try to model his responses in our own lives—make friends with the alienated, forgive the libelous and the cruel, show compassion to the lonely and the sick, and love those who are perceived to be unlovable—even when it hurts.

However we choose to commemorate the suffering of Jesus, we must be mindful that it is not what we do or eat or don’t do or don’t eat that makes us worthy or unworthy. Rather it is who we are in our hearts.

Jesus simplified all the Old Testament laws and dictates of the prophets, and even his own specific instructions, into one basic commandment: “Even as I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). Following this law even some of the time is not at all simple, though. Being human, we can’t love perfectly like Jesus—our hearts have the capacity for both sin and goodness within them and very often sin wins out—

but we can always strive to be better. As expressed by Thomas Aquinas, ‘There is nothing to prevent human nature’s being raised up to something greater, even after sin; God permits evil in order to draw forth some greater good.’”

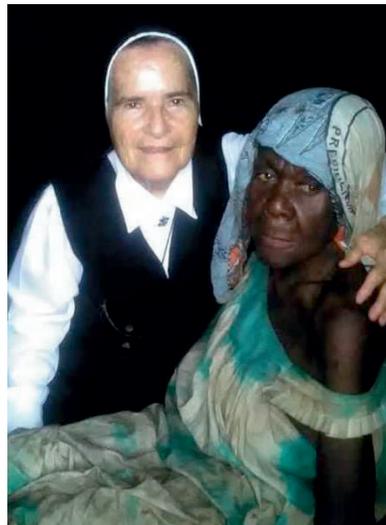
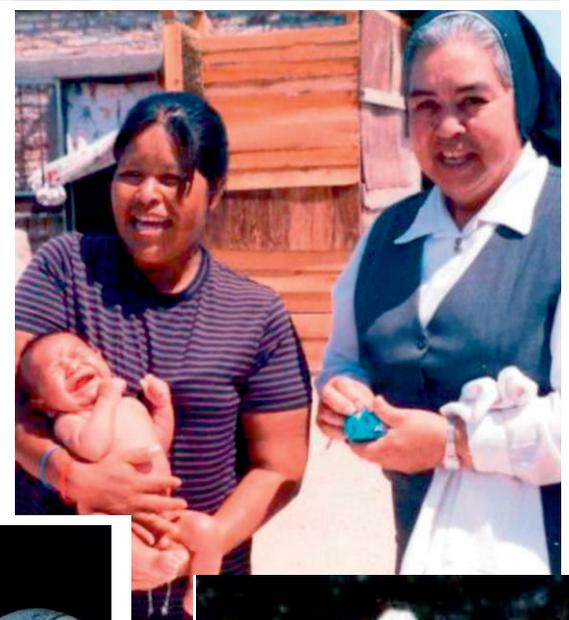
Those who have chosen the missionary path come pretty close to loving their neighbor as a way of life. I know those missionaries who represent or are supported by our office are the real deal—authentically selfless and loving. Not only do they impart the truths of the faith about Jesus and his Church, but they do so from the trenches, getting to know first-hand the struggles and needs of the people whom they serve (*see photos*) and all while never losing sight of their innate human dignity.

But we don’t have to be missionaries to strive each day to do the right thing: **Be loving and compassionate, forgiving and respectful, ideally when no one is watching.** There wasn’t much to redeem the character of George Costanza, miserable narcissist that he was, but he did make us laugh. As Paul preached, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. [And, most importantly,] *love must be sincere*” (Romans 12:6-9).

Most of you, our Mission Friends, have been bestowed with the gift of giving, and you do so generously according to your ability. And because of our size and barebones budget and absence of bureaucratic red tape, your giving is done without fanfare— indeed, for all the right reasons, *with integrity*. Please know that we, in turn, thank you simply, applaud you quietly, and, along with Jesus, embrace you in our hearts.

In Christ’s peace and love,
Lesley Warnshuis





'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday" (Isaiah 58: 3-5, 9-10).