

‘Offering It Up’: Still Good Advice for Lent

By Dolores Curran



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When my children were younger, one had a teacher he really disliked. I listened to his complaints day after day and gave empathetic responses which, of course, just prolonged his grouching. One day, however, I'd heard enough and I said, "I guess you'll just have to offer it up."

He looked up in surprise and asked, "What does that mean?"

It was my turn to show surprise. I thought everybody knew what "offer it up" meant. I was reared on it, along with "embrace your cross" and "it's God's will." But like many parents who reared children during the chaotic post-Vatican II years, I hadn't used these handy phrases with my own.

So I set out to undo the damage. I explained to my son that when we experience disappointment or pain, we can accept it stoically, complain about it or offer it up for the greater glory of God.

"What does that mean?" the same son repeated.

"It means that we put ourselves in God's hands, trustingly accepting the trials that come our way, and tell him we will endure because we know he loves us. Maybe it's a little like our not letting you go to that rock concert. You're disappointed but you know we're doing it because we love you."

He looked at me oddly and decided to let the conversation drop.

Offer it up

"Offer it up" is an old phrase with timeless value. I don't know why we dropped it, as parents or as Church, but for its time the phrase served to give meaning to pain. It can still give us an "other-focus," that is, a step outside our preoccupation with ourselves and the challenge to think of others and their suffering.

For those too young to remember what offering it up was all about, it went like this. Back in the 40's and 50's when we gave up something, like candy, a place in line or even a tattle, we were told to offer it up silently for the poor souls in purgatory or for our own shortened tenure there.

If we were in pain, we offered it up for someone in worse pain and we had the immense satisfaction of knowing that our pain had a value. It wasn't meaningless. It was a way of sharing in someone else's pain.

When you sacrificed, whether it was voluntary, like letting your brother use your baseball mitt after you said he never, never could, or involuntary, like being ill and missing the Christmas party, you offered it up for

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children who didn't have mitts or Christmas parties.

The meaning, if not the phrase, still has value today. Living in a time of instant gratification, many of us find even temporary deprivation and pain intolerable. "Why is this happening to *me*?" we ask, as if we should be exempt from the kind of suffering others undergo.

As a nation, we confuse the *pursuit* of happiness with the *right* to happiness. We don't want to suffer or deprive ourselves of anything which detracts from our happiness.

"Offering it up" is not an outdated concept, especially in the sense of offering yourself for the service of others—or in the sense of embracing life's challenges and trials for the sake of God and neighbor. It's part of that same call Jesus made in the Gospel: "If you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

The idea is not to engage in self-denial purely for the sake of self-denial, but to lift some oppression from the shoulders of others or to advance to a richer level of life than you now experience. It's never merely an exercise in self-bashing. Jesus doesn't tell the rich young man (in Matthew 19:21) simply to dump all his possessions in the lake, but to sell them and *give the money to the poor*. The form of self-denial and sharing that he is advocating is one that delivers others from poverty at the same time that it enriches—not impoverishes—the real human meaning of the young man.

I remember when "offer it up" was as common a remark as "pass the milk." When there was no prom date, Mom said "offer it up." When you shut the car door on your finger, someone kissed it and said "offer it up." Even though the expression may sound a bit flippant to our ears, it represented, even for its day, a spirituality of joining our sufferings with those of Christ and with afflicted brothers and sisters everywhere.

Today, with our growing awareness of social sin and of great masses of people living in poverty or under oppression, "offering it up" can take on an even richer meaning. It can translate into "identifying with the poor and oppressed." It reminds us to respond to our hurts, heartaches and setbacks in a spirit of solidarity with Christ, who still suffers in the afflicted people of the world.

Yes, this Lent, it still makes sense to teach our children the value of offering up their hurts and disappointments as a way of entering the kind of pain and poverty others live with daily. Even as we suffer, we can pray for another's relief. The prayer by which we ask God that our suffering may somehow set another free is a beautiful prayer.

Indeed, it is still meaningful for us to "offer up" food or drink or television or lunch breaks or candy or cigarettes, but it's important to see *why* we give them up. We offer up a lunch break, not just to cause ourselves discomfort, but perhaps to use that time to visit a coworker in the hospital or to read Scripture and discover that "we live not by bread alone but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Matthew

4:4). Or again we may do it to suffer with all those who don't have food—and with the money saved by giving up the lunch break, we help feed them.

Even offerings that may seem trivial, like giving up candy or movies, can have real meaning if done in this spirit. But we also need to think in terms of larger offerings, too—like offering to volunteer to work for better housing for the poor or better conditions for disabled persons.

Even when we feel useless because we are bedridden with sickness or have severe handicaps, we can identify with Christ's suffering and that of the poor. At those times, moreover, we can ask God that our pains and immobility be redemptive for others and for ourselves.

The New Testament gives us many good reasons for believing that our human sufferings "offered up" in these ways can have an immensely rich meaning. "I am happy about my sufferings for you," St. Paul tells the Colossians (1:25), "for by means of my physical sufferings I am helping to complete what remains of Christ's sufferings on behalf of his body, the Church."

Jesus' own suffering and life-struggle on behalf of the poor is dramatic proof that there is meaning in offering one's life and afflictions for others. And our daily "offerings up" find deeper meaning, too, when we bring them to the Eucharist and unite them with Jesus' own great offering of himself for the sake of the world.

Embrace your cross

I used to hate it when my mother responded to a childish complaint of mine with "embrace your cross." While she seemed to be empathetic, I translated it to mean "shut up and put up."

Now I realize there's a world of difference between the two admonishments that I didn't see when I was young. For those unfamiliar with the "embrace your cross" era, the phrase carried the meaning that, just as there was a cross for Jesus, which he accepted so that we might live, so are there crosses which challenge us to grow in that fullness of life found in the Kingdom Jesus announced.

How we accept them is a pretty good clue to our understanding of his words, "Take up your cross and follow me." What a statement! Nobody would get elected on it today.

What does it mean to embrace our cross? That if we truly want to follow Jesus, we better be prepared for the pain involved in a life committed to love and justice. It's part of the Christian journey. As the philosopher Francis Quarles wrote in the 1500's: "The way to bliss/lies not on a bed of down./And he that has no cross/deserves no crown."

If we feel entitled to pleasure and happiness we feel cheated, even angry with God, when we become ill or disappointed. "Sure, Jesus, I'll take up my cross," we pray, "but not *this* cross."

It's consoling to know, however, that God does not

leave us out there carrying our crosses alone. God has been there. In Jesus, God has entered our broken world. He knows how we hurt and promises to stay with us in our pain and disappointments.

At the Samaritan Shelter in Denver, a haven for the homeless and downtrodden, there is a life-sized crucifix of Jesus with one arm outstretched to the world. Often when the staff enters the chapel they find a member of a dispossessed family holding the hand, sharing Jesus' pain and garnering courage to better bear his or her own. It's a powerful image—holding Jesus' hand on the cross.

In spite of my childhood understanding, "embrace your cross" does not mean "put up and shut up." The difference lies in our finding redemptive value in our suffering. Jesus redeemed us but we continue the process of redemption by uniting our "dyings and risings" with those of Christ. If we unite ourselves with Christ's death, St. Paul tells us, we will also be united with his resurrection (Romans 6:3-6).

Something valuable can be drawn from our pain. For example, it can lead us to be more empathetic with suffering brothers and sisters or challenge us to grow as followers of Christ.

There is a saying that goes, "Pain is inevitable. Growth is optional." How we grow through pain is our choice—growing pains, so to speak.

Let's focus this Lent on how well we embrace our little and big crosses, whether in the family or in society at large. What crosses have we experienced that were painful but helped us to become a better spouse, parent, child or citizen? What possible value was there in losing the big game, in having chicken pox on Field Day, in being turned down for the job, in being told, "I'm sorry, but your daddy isn't going to live here anymore"? When we can look back and admit that when we responded generously to past crosses, we became better persons, we will be better able to accept present crosses.

Can we climb up there on the cross with Jesus and say, "I hurt; move over and help me with this"? Or do we rail out bitterly at our lot and do unto others so that they will be in pain, too?

It's our choice—not the cross, but how we embrace it. Jesus had the same choice and, lucky for us, he embraced his cross with those beautiful trusting words to his father, "Thy will, not mine, be done."

Eat your plate

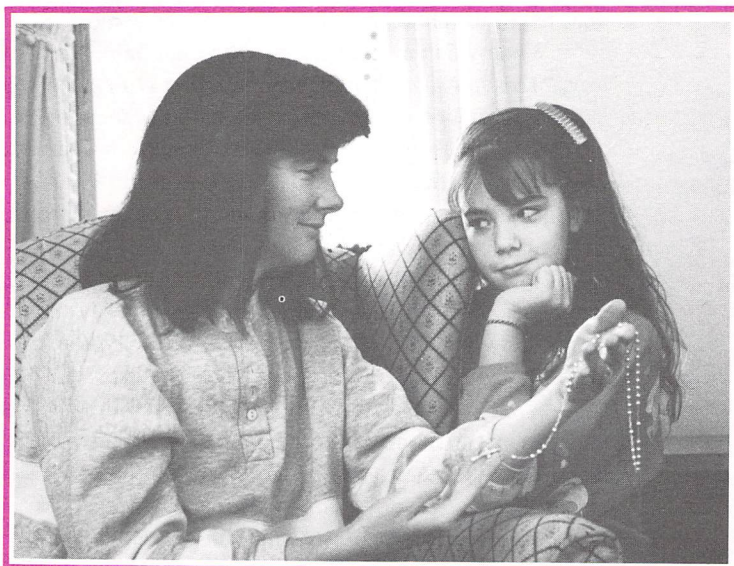
When we were little kids and balked at eating something placed on our plates by a caring mother, she would say, "Eat your plate." For other mothers, the expression was "clean your plate" or "think of the poor starving children in China."

We had many tired jokes about the difficulty of "eating our plates" but it was much later in life that I learned other children heard the same reasons for eating beet greens or liver, not because they were good for us but because we were lucky to have food when others didn't. Some of my friends' mothers used other peoples for comparison, like "the starving Armenians," but the

idea was the same.

As in so many areas, I swore I would never use my mother's technique for encouraging a child to eat unappetizing food because a child can't make the connection: How does my eating this stuff help a starving Chinese child?

But, of course, I did. When my three turned up their noses at a casserole, I felt anger rising in me and intoned, "Those Bangladesh kids would give anything to have this." Ah, yes, the cycle goes on. The countries may change but mothers don't.



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Still, there *is* a connection, even if children are unable to see it because they are too young to think abstractly. A religion teacher used a better technique to teach the lesson. She asked her class of eleven-year-olds, "Can a good Christian child have two coats if another school child has none?"

There followed a spirited discussion. They finally agreed that they couldn't be good Christians and not give up one of their coats. She broadened the question from school to community, then to state, country and world. The more distant the needy, the less obligated her students felt to give up their second coats.

It's a good question for discussion during Lent. For young children the question may be: Do I have a right to ten stuffed animals if other children have none? And all of us may need to ask: Do I have the right to waste food or the earth's resources when others go hungry or live in dire poverty?

One simple way of observing Lent in the family is to agree that during Lent we will eat what is offered or go hungry until the next meal.

This makes the connection for kids because they don't like hunger pangs. Many, in fact, have never experienced them. Whatever our circumstances, we can all use experiences of hunger to help us relate with God's children in Biafra and elsewhere, those with big sad eyes and bloated stomachs.

Once we know what hunger *feels* like, we may feel more compassion and responsibility for the hungry in our world, even if they don't live on our street.

Two reflections

For all those who would like to reinstate the idea of self-sacrifice this Lent, I suggest reflection on the following two points:

1. Children model acceptance of God's will on their parents' acceptance of it. If parents complain bitterly about temporary setbacks and disappointments, children learn from them that God is uncaring and unfair. If, however, parents maintain their trust in God even in times of crises and share their belief that God will never abandon them and can draw good even out of the evils that befall us, children will learn to do the same.

When we adults experience personal pain, we can say, "This hurts but I offer it up in union with suffering people everywhere—people with terminal cancer or victims of religious persecution, for example—and with Jesus' own suffering." Or we can go even further and let our pain motivate us to bring comfort to a neighbor suffering from even worse pain.

When we lose an important contract at work or a much needed scholarship for college, we can say, "I don't know why this happened but I trust that with God's help this will work out for the greater good."

When we are angry with someone, we can withhold any bitter words and say instead, "I'm very angry but I want to make peace between us and for the sake of peace in the world."

When we do the above, our children are watching and listening.

2. We can all make sacrifices for a greater good. The phrase used in sports training—"No pain, no gain,"—applies to our spiritual health as well. When we give up cigarettes or television during Lent, the struggle can make us stronger, give us more control over ourselves and help us better to understand the sacrifice of Jesus.

Indeed, "No pain, no gain" might be translated in Jesus' words as, "No cross, no resurrection." Or "No Good Friday, no Easter."

What are some things we could offer or give up today for our neighbor's sake as well as our own?

In the family, we could consider the following: eating what's served without complaint; turning off TV one night a week and using the time to help someone in need; not waiting to be asked to help.

Whatever our circumstances, we could consider: giving up displays of temper; giving up between-meal snacks (and sending the money to a good cause); walking instead of riding to school or work; volunteering time to visit the sick or to work with disabled persons or to serve at a soup kitchen.

As we consider these and other possibilities, let's return to the Scriptures and once again convince ourselves that the idea of "offering it up" and of sacrificial love is central to God's revelation. St. Paul, for example, tells the Corinthians: "Every athlete in training submits to strict discipline in order to be crowned with a wreath that will not last; but we do it for one that will last forever" (1 Corinthians 9:25).

And who can surpass Jesus' teaching and example in this regard: "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13)? ■

A FAMILY SPIRITUALITY CHECKUP

Many families have no religious traditions at all. It isn't fair to deny our children the traditions and celebrations our parents passed on to us. As parents ourselves, we are accountable for the presence or absence of spiritual activity in the family. If we don't want to pass on old traditions, then we need to develop some new ones to take their place in today's families: bedtime blessings, perhaps, or car prayers.

Here's a little assessment test I use with parents who are interested in enriching the faith climate in their homes. I suggest parents take a moment to focus on the spiritual health of their family life and compare it to that which they inherited from their parents.

Listed below are several religious traditions once widely found in the Catholic family. Check those which were an important part of your childhood.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> daily rosary | <input type="checkbox"/> Forty Hours |
| <input type="checkbox"/> rosary during Lent | <input type="checkbox"/> holy candles |
| <input type="checkbox"/> May crowning | <input type="checkbox"/> family prayers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> novenas | <input type="checkbox"/> bedtime blessings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> home holy water fonts | <input type="checkbox"/> Advent wreath |
| <input type="checkbox"/> spiritual bouquets | <input type="checkbox"/> giving up for Lent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> family Stations of the Cross | <input type="checkbox"/> weekly confession |
| <input type="checkbox"/> blessing of throats | <input type="checkbox"/> holy calendars |
| <input type="checkbox"/> visits to church | <input type="checkbox"/> holy cards |
| <input type="checkbox"/> guardian angels | <input type="checkbox"/> statues |
| <input type="checkbox"/> patron saints | <input type="checkbox"/> medals |
| <input type="checkbox"/> parish mission | <input type="checkbox"/> scapulars |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fish on Friday | <input type="checkbox"/> serving Mass |
| <input type="checkbox"/> offering up | <input type="checkbox"/> religious magazines |
| <input type="checkbox"/> home shrines | <input type="checkbox"/> car prayers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> religious singing | <input type="checkbox"/> Scripture reading |
| <input type="checkbox"/> religious stories | <input type="checkbox"/> home blessings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sacred Heart dedication | <input type="checkbox"/> others |

Now go back and circle those which you are passing on to your children.

On a separate sheet add any religious traditions, symbols, rituals or celebrations which you have initiated in your family to replace the above.

Finally, tally up the number of traditions you experienced as a child and the number your children are experiencing. Is their home faith life as rich as yours was when you were growing up?

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