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Religion Expert: Lent May Help Catholics During Economic Downturn

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DURHAM, N.H. – As Catholics prepare to enter the Lenten season, choosing to make financial sacrifices for religious reasons may help those concerned about the economic downturn, according to Michele Dillon, professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 6, 2008. The Lenten season marks 40 days prior to Easter Sunday and is a time of reflection on the life of Jesus Christ. Those who observe Lent often give up something as an act of penance and fast periodically during the season.

"With the downturn in the economy and the general air of recession, individuals and families who feel they need to cut back on certain purchases might use Lent as a timely opportunity to make the sacrifices they feel necessary. Making economic sacrifices in the context of Lent with its emphasis on personal sacrifice for religious reasons might make some people feel a bit more upbeat about down-sizing some of their consumption habits," Dillon says.

According to Dillon, Lent is still relevant to today's Catholics, but has not been as salient in their lives in the last few decades as it has been in the past.

"Nonetheless, it is an important liturgical and cultural marker, reminding Catholics to take stock of their lives, and in this era of self-indulgence, to practice an element of self-denial by sacrificing some of their cherished everyday consumption habits," Dillon says.

"It is also a good opportunity for Catholics to commit to new habits -- to helping others, to renewing their faith through spiritual reading, etc. Lent provides a good pause amidst hectic schedules and a reminder to individuals to review and reassess their larger values and priorities," she says.

According to Dillon, many American church-going Catholics take Lent quite seriously. "Even those who would call themselves non-churchgoing 'cultural Catholics' are nudged by the date in the calendar (Shrove Tuesday/Ash Wednesday) to at least think about practicing a little bit of self-denial," she says.

Dillon has written extensively on Catholicism in the United States and elsewhere, and has been especially interested in the institutional and cultural processes that enable Catholics who selectively disagree with aspects of Catholic teaching to remain loyal to Catholicism. She also has examined the political engagement of the Catholic Church, and of other churches and activist organizations in public moral debates in different western countries. She is the author of "Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power."

