

The fifth largest religion in the World is Sikhism. That is after Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Sikhs are usually recognized by the large turbans they wear, and usually they have very large mustaches.

You often see them in big cities. The religion originated in India in the 16th century. I knew a lot of Sikhs when I worked for GM and Ford.

They adhere to a sort of universalism with elements of Hinduism and Islam; most of the world's Sikhs live in the Indian state of Punjab.

All practicing Sikhs keep their hair uncut (which is why they wear turbans), wear a small comb in their hair (under the turban), wear a round iron bracelet, carry a short ceremonial sword, and wear a special sort of undergarment.

What you can imagine, is that whenever a Sikh who is practicing their religion comes into a room – there is no question what religion they are.

Several years ago, on Ash Wednesday, my younger brother went to morning Mass, received ashes on his forehead, and went to the office. Nobody really gave much thought or attention to this; as most of his coworkers were either Catholic, former Catholics, or Christians familiar enough with Catholicism.

All except one guy, who was a practicing Sikh. Who walked up to my brother's desk with a puzzled look and in all sincerity said "You have dirt on your head." My brother said, "Excuse me?" And the Sikh gentleman repeated, "You have a large smudge of dirt on your head."

When my brother replied that it was a religious practice marking the beginning of a season of penance in Catholicism, the Sikh replied:

"How strange. Your religion certainly needs to get with the times."

This from a man in a turban, with a long beard, and a ceremonial sword.

Yet, there is a prophetic ring to this man's words. St. Paul tells us "Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

So, what about us. We're all about to get in line and receive ashes – or in the words of the gentleman from my brother's office – "get dirt on our heads."

For those of us who are older than 18 and younger than 59 – we are fasting. For anyone over 14, we are abstaining from meat.

Why are we doing this?

There is a term we used called "asceticism" which means "self-denial of something for a higher purpose."

The Catholic author G. K. Chesterton believed that asceticism was greatly misunderstood.

Asceticism, in the religious sense, is the repudiation of the great mass of human joys because of the supreme joyfulness of the one joy, the religious joy. But asceticism is not in the least confined to religious asceticism: there is scientific asceticism which asserts that truth is alone satisfying; there is æsthetic asceticism which asserts that art is alone satisfying; there is amatory asceticism which asserts that love is alone satisfying. There is even epicurean asceticism, which asserts that beer and skittles are

alone satisfying. Wherever the manner of praising anything involves the statement that the speaker could live with that thing alone, there lies the germ and essence of asceticism.

So, what is the focus of our religious asceticism?

I would propose that it is that we aspire to the ultimate end of living with God in eternity at the end of our earthly life. And so, in periods like Lent and Advent, we abstain from the finer things for a time, in order to direct our minds and our bodies to the ultimate end – namely God.

For most of us, this can seem like a far-off thing.

It is probably easier to eat less sweets and wake up early to run a mile if the ultimate goal is moving ahead in this year's softball tournament; than it is to do this for God; but life with God for all eternity **IS** our ultimate goal.

The word we use is REPENT. And despite its connotations of condemnation, the meanings of the words from Scripture that we translate as REPENT are: (1) to turn or turn back, (2) to let go, (3) to change ones mind or heart.

So, how do we implement this in our lives?

Let's start with "to turn or turn back."

We can "turn" a lot of things. Turn off the TV. Turn off the iPod. Turn off the computer. Turn off the radio.

Ask God to fill the silence with His presence.

Next is "to let go."

We can "let go" of past hurts and past grudges. We can "let go" of things that clutter our houses and our lives. We can "let go" of food, or drink, or other pleasures.

And we can ask God to fill the hunger with Himself. We can ask God to fill the empty space with His presence.

And finally is "to change your mind and your heart."

We can "change" our negative habits, and attitudes, and emotions. We can "change" our desires for things which take us away from being children of God, or from being a good parent, spouse, child, student, or worker. We can "change" how we look at our neighbor, or how we look at our job.

We can ask God to change us into the image and likeness of Himself.

And so, we are now entering into a period of "self-denial" in order to direct our hearts and minds toward God and away from the things that distract us from our ultimate end.

This Lent, let us get with the times – as St. Paul reminds us, NOW is the "acceptable time" ... NOW is the "day of salvation" and empty ourselves of excessive thoughts and things ... and let our hearts and minds be filled with the love and the grace of God.