

A Lenten treasure hunt

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In Review



Simplifying the Soul

By Paula Huston

Ave Maria Press

My Lenten practice has almost involved some kind of endurance. As a child I usually gave up something like chocolate or sweets. My practice evolved into committing to

walk to the grocery store or buy nothing but food or, one year, give up plastic.

But regardless of what I took on or gave up, I have always intended for this to last through all of Lent. The practice ends—or finds a new form—at Holy Week, and the endurance test ends with it.

This year, Lent has an entirely different rhythm for me—because of a book by writer and Benedictine oblate Paula Huston. In *Simplifying the Soul*, Huston recommends a different small practice for each day of Lent. Each week has a specific focus as well: simplifying space, money, time, care for your body, care for your mind, relationships and finally prayer. For each of these, the book recommends individual practices like giving away something to which you have an emotional attachment or going without your cell phone for a day. These practices—each on its own very simple and straightforward—are accompanied by words of Jesus, words of the desert fathers and a meditation by Huston.

Using this book for an individual retreat has been a remarkable experience. “Scrub a dirty corner” became a meditation on living on the surface of things. “Make a meal from forgotten items” became a meditation on overlooked blessings. In each case, the mundane offered an opportunity to visit some neglected region of my soul or to raise questions about something I take for granted or to point out something that needs change. Yet the book does this with an overriding gentleness and warmth that makes each day into a kind of treasure hunt.

The only way to know the treasures this book holds is to do the practices. On the surface they often look like nothing; they’re so simple that they call forth my arrogance. (“I give things away all of the time!” “I’m not addicted to my cell phone!”) But underneath is the richness of discovering the need for repentance and the way that Lent calls me more deeply into love.