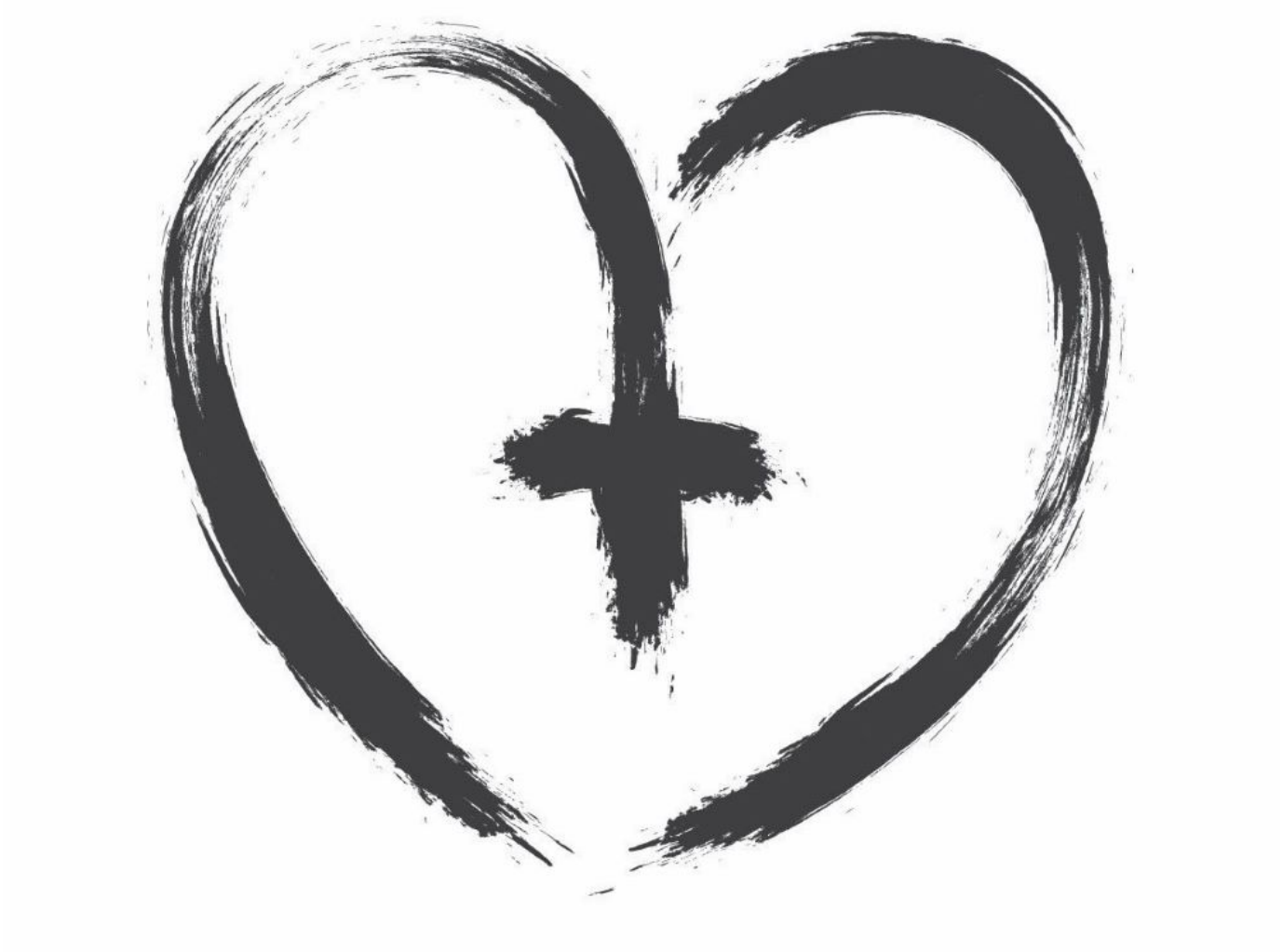
Columns
Spirituality





by Julie A. Ferraro

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The irony of Lent starting on Valentine's Day was not lost on me. Yet, it confirmed a message that has been much discussed over the centuries by theologians, while being lived "in the trenches" of daily life by the most humble of humans. It's all about love.

A few months ago, Rome's St. Peter's Square showcased a display commemorating the 800th anniversary of St. Francis of Assisi creating the first nativity scene in Greccio, Italy. According to reports, this display had been planned for two years. Francis preached about the exquisite love God showed to the world by deciding to become human and live among us. For him, the Incarnation wasn't just about saving us from sin, as emphasized during the upcoming triduum. It was about sharing the experience of each day — the happiness and sorrows, the trials and celebrations.

St. Francis lived that love not only in theory but in practice. Having visited Assisi twice, I've discovered the struggle of ascending the steep hill from the valley where Francis and his early followers lived to the city, where he begged for food for the lepers or stones for rebuilding the chapels of San Damiano, St. Mary of the Angels and others. He did this every day, tangibly showing his love to those for whom he cared, with a song of joyful praise on his lips.

That was Christmas; this is Lent — symbolized by the merging of Valentine's Day with Ash Wednesday.

St. Benedict, in his Rule, highlighted the latter, starting Chapter 49 with the recommendation, "The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent," as translated in *The Benedictine Handbook*. The sixth-century founder of this monastic order stressed a more penitential lifestyle — albeit balanced with moderation — asserting that Jesus came to redeem humanity, and we should always be humbly grateful for that.

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Benedict does grasp the significance of showing love for one another, as Jesus did for all he encountered on his travels, but in a different way than Francis. For instance, in Chapter 63, Benedict writes (as translated by Benedictine Sr. Judith Sutera), "The younger, then, must love their elders and the older love the younger."

Still, Benedict continued Chapter 49 by instructing his community members to deny their appetites by giving up a bit of food or drink, talking less and even curtailing "loose behavior."

For those who act out of love — parents, especially — all these ideals apply. When money is tight, for instance, a mother might sacrifice her portion of dinner so the children can eat their fill. When a teenager makes mistakes and gets in trouble — my sons certainly did! — love is standing by his side in front of the judge in a courtroom and supporting the offender as he takes responsibility. It's dropping whatever task is at hand and driving miles through heavy snow to help when the wannabe mechanic's car breaks down (then, embarrassing him in front of his friends by being able to start the engine when he couldn't).

Love is, after all, a complex term, manifested in many ways, as Jesus demonstrated on numerous occasions. As I've engaged in both Franciscan and Benedictine studies — most recently working toward a Graduate Certificate in Benedictine Spirituality at St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, while simultaneously participating in the two-year Franciscan Way of Life cohort through the Wheaton Franciscan Sisters — my understanding of just how much Jesus loved humanity, and wants us to love each other, continues to expand.

Yes, life should be all about love — an unconditional love as modeled by Jesus, St. Francis and St. Benedict, with all its varied expressions — and the practices we engage in during this Lent can enrich that love for all.