Pastor's Pen: Time for a Great Reset

I had a wonderful time during my three weeks of vacation. My vacations have a tendency to be very retreat-like. I had substantial time for prayer and Mass every day. I got a fair amount of hiking in. I did quite a bit of reading. I had ample time to mentally, spiritually, and physically reset.

Those who follow me on social media know I have physically undergone a profound transformation. For the first time in my adult life my blood work was perfect. My diabetes is completely under control. I have lost close to 90 lbs. The major cause for this has been a profound change in diet: I quit eating ultra-processed foods. I wildly suggest people read Ultra-Processed People by Chris VanTulleken and The Dorito Effect by Mark Schatzger to this end.

But this transformation sparked a thought in me over the vacation: We are what we consume. This is true for all living things. As human beings this reaches beyond the physical and into the mental and spiritual. Everything we consume through our mouths, eyes, ears, and other senses changes us. It can change us for the better or for the worse. But we freely consume, more often than not, without knowing what changes consumption will bring.

To draw a parallel, with ultra-processed foods, in the processing the nutritional value and the true flavor of the food are destroyed and flavonoids, emulsifiers, preservatives, and such are added to give it a 'food like' taste and substance. This is done because our brains tell us what to eat, how much to eat, and when to eat. Many of these synthetic substances, while appealing to our brain's pleasure centers, override the brain's mechanism for telling us we have had enough; in other words they are made to be addictive. They are made to make us over consume.

I have read study after study on how smart devices and social media have the same effect on our brains; they are designed to be addictive. Then I came to the conclusion that conventional media is much the same. All appeal to something in our brains that brings pleasure. The override gets shut off and we become addicted.

It is that way God made us. The pleasure centers in the body are not evil. They are there for good reason. So is the part that tells us to be wise.

We know addicts will start to surrender other parts of their lives to satiate the addiction. No addict likes admitting they are addicts. But the truth sets us free.

In purging ultra-processed foods from my system during vacation, I also purged what I called ultra-processed truth…which is no more actual truth than ultra-processed food is real food. Ultra-processed truth is similar to ultra-processed food in that real truth is the starting point then is so pulverized through the processing that additives such as bias, prejudice, indignation, and other agendas are added and then fed to us through media. We consume it because we find it pleasurable. It appeals to us and we over

consume: our identity gets wrapped up tight and like all addiction, other things get laid aside…all too often the core of our faith is the first thing laid aside.

So, in the same vacation I also wildly cut back on my consumption of all types of media. Like the freedom I feel with not huffing and puffing physically through life without my obesity, so the freedom I feel mentally and spiritually without the media.

But nature abhors a vacuum. The time spent has to be reallocated somewhere. For me, that went to reading more. Reading a book fires a different part of the brain than doom scrolling. It is a part of the brain that needs to be fired up. Some of that time was reallocated to prayer time. Some of that time was reallocated to food prep of actual food. I came back from those three weeks reset mentally, spiritually, and physically better off.

Next week we come upon Advent, the 4 week period of preparation for both the celebration of the first Coming of Christ in Bethlehem 2000 years ago and to look forward in hope and faith for that time Christ will return in glory. Might I suggest a time for a great reset in each of our lives? I know we normally associate such an activity with Lent. But it is really an ongoing part of our Catholic life. Maybe we evaluate what we allow into our lives; each of us is the gatekeeper of our body and souls. Remembering that everything we allow in transforms us for ill or for good, might we consider as a matter of preparation what we allow in and be truthful about why we let it in?

We can allow in truth, faith, love, mercy, forgiveness, generosity, hope, and other things that will reset those leisure centers in our brains and bring us a true sense of calm in the storm and peace regardless of the world around us. We can approach those things with a sense of sober truth and loving resolution.

We can also allow prejudice, bias, rash judgment, despair, pride, greed, lust, and other things that also might appeal to those same pleasure centers of our brains but do the same long term damage that ultra-processed foods do to the body.

What do we consume that feeds either? Sometimes our media consumption builds strong echo chambers that override our soul's failsafe to mercy. How we allocate our time, resources, and energy affects every part of our being. God gives us grace, His Holy Spirit, His Divine Word, and His wisdom to rightly and prudently allocate our time, energy, and resources. He does not make us use them.

Maybe this Advent, we use this time as a great reset of our bodies, minds, and souls. We will be the better, the happier, and the freer for it.