

FASTING, PRAYER & ACTS OF CHARITY

THE THREE PILLARS OF LENT

As the Gospel for Ash Wednesday reminds us (Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18), during the season of Lent, we are invited to intensify our efforts in three, crucial areas of our discipleship: fasting, prayer and acts of charity. It is not that we do not live these throughout the rest of the year (well, hopefully!), but in the season of Lent we renew, refresh and strengthen them. Here are a few thoughts or suggestions for doing just that:

FASTING:

Fasting can take many forms. There is the obvious way of fasting: of not eating certain foods or not eating at certain times. But fasting can also occur in other ways. We could, for example, try fasting from the computer, or the ever-present and life-dominating smart phone. It is worth recalling that fasting is, in a way, a means to an end. We fast so as to remember that we should not have our lives controlled by certain things or appetites. It also helps us to be mindful of those who do not have even the basic necessities of life. Furthermore, fasting is a great reminder that all we have and are is not actually ours; but rather that it is a gift from God.

Of course, for Catholics, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are obligatory days of fasting and abstinence. In addition, Fridays during Lent are obligatory days of abstinence in the dioceses of the USA. According to Church Law, all Catholics ages 18 until 59 are obliged to fast. Fasting is taken to mean having one full meal; as well as two small meals (that together are not equal to a full meal). The norms of abstinence from meat are binding for Catholics ages 14 and up.

PRAYER:

Lent is a time when we can focus or refocus on prayer. Hopefully, we do take time to pray. After all, it is so essential for us. We are made to pray! If we do not eat properly or keep hydrated, then our bodies soon get sick and decline. So too with prayer. If we do not pray then our spirit quickly gets sick and withers, and our relationship with God fades away. Prayer is not always easy, but we should not think that we cannot pray. Saint Francis de Sales famously wrote that everyone can pray, because, he said, “so long as they are capable of grace, they are also capable of prayer.” He went on to say: “it is only the devil who is incapable of prayer, because he alone is incapable of love.”

ACTS OF CHARITY:

“Mercy is the showpiece of the soul” St. Augustine reminds us; but *how* can we be merciful? Mercy is a very practical and real thing and not just some nice concept or idea. There are so many ways that we can respond to the mercy that we have received by showing mercy to others. In our Christian tradition there are two main ways that we can do this: what are called the *corporal* and the *spiritual* works of mercy (they are based on the Final Judgment in Mathew’s Gospel, chapter 25: “Lord, when did we see you...?”). The corporal works of mercy are: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, ransoming captives (think of human trafficking for example) and burying the dead. The spiritual works of mercy are: instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, admonishing the sinner, gladly forgiving injuries, bearing wrongs patiently and praying for living and the dead.

May this Lent be for all of us, a time of true transfiguration and transformation!