



♦ Lent begins Ash Wednesday

This Wednesday, millions of Catholics across our nation will go to their local church to receive ashes on their forehead. Why ashes? In the religious realm, ashes have a twofold meaning:

- They are a stark reminder of our mortality. Hence, the words: *“Remember, man, you are but dust and unto dust you shall return.”*
- Ashes are a sign of repentance. In ancient Israel, when people felt convicted of sin and were moved to repentance, they put on ‘sackcloth and ashes.’ On Ash Wednesday, as the minister places the ashes on our forehead, he/she will say: *“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.”*

In essence, when we come to church next Wednesday to receive ashes on our forehead, we are publicly saying to the Lord: “I want, with the help of your grace, to change my heart where change is needed.”

We may think we are pretty good and decent people and may wonder what it is we need to repent of. This is not an easy question to answer. **Despite the fact that the vast majority, if not all, of us live good and decent lives, the truth is also that many of us, including myself, may be blind to what needs changing in our lives.** All too many of us live ‘spiritually drowsy’ lives. We are so busy living our daily lives that we become deaf or at least hard of hearing when it comes to listening to the voice of the Spirit who is constantly nudging us to change what needs to be changed in our lives.

How many of us take time to come aside from our busy schedules to be quiet before the Lord? How many of us take time to ask the Holy Spirit to help us hear what he may be saying to us in the events and encounters of daily life? How many of us live life reflectively? We can be sure that God is always seeking to communicate with us. But who is listening? How tuned in are we to the Holy Spirit? There are so many voices seeking to get our attention that the voice of the Holy Spirit may be drowned out.

The first thing many of us may need to repent of is our failure to take time to sit quietly before the Lord so that

we can hear and discern his Word for us. I realize that that can be a tall order because we may feel that God never speaks to us. If we feel that way, we can assume that, spiritually, we may be hard of hearing.

If we feel that God rarely or never speaks to us, our first Lenten prayer might be: “Lord, heal my spiritual deafness. Open the inner ears of my heart so that I can hear your promptings and call to conversion.” That prayer in itself is wonderful because it expresses a *desire* to hear and respond to our Lord. Literally millions of people have no such desire. They are too busy with other stuff.

Spiritual smugness

I believe that one of the biggest dangers that we who are ‘good and decent Catholics’ have to face is the tendency to fall into a kind of ‘spiritual smugness.’ We may feel that there is little or no need for change in our lives because we say our prayers, go to Church, contribute to the support of our parish, and try to be nice to everyone. What more could be asked of us? The Gospel answer is—uncomfortably—a lot more.

As Christians, our model is always Christ who gave his whole life that we would escape hell and enjoy eternal life with him. When we look at our lives through the lens of the Gospel, we are *always* falling short. I don’t say that to make you feel bad about your Christian walk. I say it because the reality is that we *are always falling short* of who or what we ought to be as disciples of Jesus; hence, the need for what we call *ongoing conversion*. **Our ‘life in Christ’ is always calling us to change our heart, attitude, mindset and behavior that are not fully conformed to those of Jesus. Our life in Christ is always calling us to be more something...: more generous, more forgiving, more compassionate, more loving, more humble, more gracious, more prayerful.** One reason saints often went to confession is because they were deeply aware of their need for a deeper conversion in their walk with Christ. A little prayer I recently came across goes:

*Disturb us, O Lord,
when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
when our dreams have come true
because we dreamed so little;
when we have arrived in safety because
we sailed too close to the shore.*

Three traditional Lenten practices to help us on our way

In the Gospel on Ash Wednesday, Jesus will speak to us about prayer, fasting and almsgiving. During his forty days in the desert, he was engaged in extensive prayer and fasting.

Prayer

Prayer is turning to God. It involves making space for God in our lives. Authentic prayer involves “allowing God to have his way with us.” In prayer, we stand, sit or kneel, vulnerable before God, asking him to show us where and how we need conversion and healing in our lives.

Fasting

If Jesus fasted, we need to fast too (unless our doctor tells us not to). Fasting can take many forms: less TV, alcohol, internet, shopping, negative talk. But we should all consider doing *some* form of fasting from *food* (and *sugary drinks*). Food is what Jesus fasted from. We need to experience some hunger in the belly to identify even just a small bit with starving people and to get in touch with the hungers of the soul. Ideally, our fasting is a means to an end. We fast from some shopping so that we may give to the poor. We fast from a half hour of TV to make space for prayer.

Almsgiving

Almsgiving is our way to reach out to the poor by sharing our money, clothing and food. We can give gifts of food, money and clothing to our *Thrift Store* and *Social Concerns* office (both located on Aurora Road, a half mile west of U.S.1).

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving—like three legs of a tripod—make up the traditional Lenten practices. Prayer nourishes our spirits. Fasting disciplines our bodies, helps us seek the Lord with greater intensity, and puts us in solidarity with those who suffer. Works of charity enlarge our hearts as we commit ourselves to the good of others. Properly utilized, fasting, prayer and almsgiving can bring about a change of heart. They are not the point of Lent but rather spiritual aids that help us ‘put on Christ’ a little more.

Pope Francis says:

Pope Francis urges Catholics to pray for the conversion of our hearts and to give up the culture of indifference which is becoming more prevalent. *“During this Lent, then, brothers and sisters,”* Pope Francis says, *“let us all ask the Lord: Fac cor nostrum secundum cor tuum—Make our hearts like yours. In this way we will receive a heart, which is firm and merciful, attentive and generous, a heart which is not closed, indifferent, or prey to the globalization of indifference. It is my prayerful hope that this Lent will prove spiritually fruitful for each believer and every ecclesial community.”*

GUIDELINES FOR LENT AND EASTER

**Ash Wednesday, March 1,
and Good Friday, April 14,
are days of fasting and abstinence.
Fridays of Lent are also days of abstinence.**

Fasting, almsgiving, and prayer are the three traditional disciplines of Lent. The faithful and catechumens (unbaptized persons) should undertake these practices seriously in a spirit of penance and in preparation for Baptism or renewal of Baptism at Easter.

Fasting is to be observed by all 18 years of age and older who have not yet celebrated their 59th birthday. On a fast day, one full meal is allowed. Two other meals, sufficient to maintain strength, may be taken according to each one’s needs, but together they should not equal another full meal. Eating between meals is not permitted, but liquids, including milk and juices, are allowed.

Abstinence is to be observed by all 14 years of age and older. On days of abstinence, no meat is allowed. Note that when health or ability to work would be seriously affected, the church does not oblige. When in doubt concerning fasting and abstinence, consult the parish priest.

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran

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