

Lent: A Penitential Season – Part 4

While Lent is a season of God's grace, the Church identifies it as a penitential season. When a penitent comes to celebrate confession, they are given a "penance" to perform after they confess. Some think that penance is a "punishment" that, once performed, will somehow make up for sins; however, a penance is given as an aid for returning to God more fully. The penance given usually involves some type of self-control. For example, the priest may tell you to read a chapter in the Bible. This means switching off the television and opening the Bible. You may be asked to forgive someone or do something good to someone who has harmed you. A corporal work of mercy such as visiting the sick can be a prescription. All of these, which are never easy, are a means of self-growth.

Corporal Works of Mercy

It is important that we reach out to people. There are many ways to reach out. The Catholic Church has traditionally identified seven works of corporal mercy. They are:

- Feed the hungry
- Give drink to the thirsty
- Shelter the homeless
- Visit the sick
- Visit those in prison
- Bury the dead
- Give alms to the poor

Spiritual Works of Mercy

There are also seven spiritual works of mercy:

- Instruct the ignorant in our faith
- Counsel the doubtful
- Admonish the sinner
- Bear wrongs patiently
- Forgive offenses willingly
- Comfort the afflicted
- Pray for the living and the dead

Within this penitential season, we are always looking for ways to come back to God more fully. We can grow lax and so require a new surge toward God. Expressions of contrition (sorrow) and positive actions are called for. This season offers us ample opportunity.

In Lent, we concentrate on turning away from self, selfishness, and self-absorbed desires. We can practice many types of self-denial, such as giving up television, drinking alcohol, or eating desserts. In a more positive slant, we try to give more time to God. Attendance at daily Mass can lead to greater depths with God. People invest time in reading the Scriptures and other spiritual books. Many pray the stations of the cross or rosary. Scores go to confession and turn away from known sins. Repentance is a hallmark of Lent.

The Church gives us several strategies for action. Besides the corporal and spiritual works of mercy listed above, there are three traditional "pillars" for Lent. They are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These pillars are proclaimed in the Gospel on Ash Wednesday. Jesus invites us: "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret, and your Father who sees you in secret will reward you... When you give alms, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing... When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face..." (Matthew 6). Jesus' point was, don't do religious deeds to be seen and thought well of, but do them secretly so that you might experience a great reward.

Prayer

Most struggle with prayer. We wonder: "Am I praying correctly?" Prayer is not complicated. Actually, it is quite simple. Anyone, no matter your age can pray. God is always ready when you are. Prayer doesn't cost money. You do not need to be in a church or travel to a specific location. You can pray right where you are, just as you are. You don't have to be a wealthy person or someone of great notoriety. In fact, Jesus taught that sinners are heard sometimes more than the religious.

Jesus taught: "When you pray, go into your room and pray to your Father who is in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:6). While prayer can be communitarian, at its heart, prayer is solitary. At its essence, it is a simple communication between you and God.

Jesus told us to go to our room and pray in secret. Many individuals set up small chapels in a room with a table, books, a candle, and a chair. Prayer is communal, but also solitary. Solitude is a prized commodity. You are replenished by your quiet, alone time with God.

Prayer is deeply personal and demands vulnerability and simple honesty. Examine your heart. Get in touch with your feelings. Express what you are going through. Share your heart with God. Don't hide anything. You don't need to multiply your words. Take as long as you need, but don't drag things out. Don't try to sound holy. Simply be conversational. Don't repeat yourself. God hears you the first time you say it. In fact, God knows what you need even before you ask him! (See Matthew 6:7–8).

You may experience dry times with God. You begin to love the glory of consolation, and wonder if there was anything that you are doing or have not done, that caused these desert moments. As you seek God, you come to understand that you must consistently practice thanksgiving. Thanking God for his gifts and praising God for his goodness opens our hearts up to receive consolation. God lavishes a greater awareness of his love on those who make time for worship. It is God's will for us to give God thanks. (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Practice praise daily. Make thanksgiving a major part of your daily prayer life. You will sense God's presence in a more intense way. While prayer can transcend consciousness awareness, in a nutshell, we are trying to connect with and become aware of God.

Be Yourself

We all have our own way and unique personality. St. Therese of Lisieux often spoke of having her "own little way." She found that many envisioned God as harsh and punishing. She knew God as merciful and kind. She related to a good and gracious God. When we approach God in prayer, we need to come to God as a loving father who isn't against us, but for us. No matter what we have done in the past, God forgives us and doesn't hold anything against us. Approach God's throne of grace confidently with the assurance of his understanding and mercy.

Be yourself when you pray. Develop your "only little way" with God, given your background and life experiences. Because you are unique and have a distinct personality and journey, you can relate to God in a way no one else ever has. Certainly, it is good to learn from others, but don't try to be like anyone else. Develop your own unique way of communicating and expressing yourself to God.

It is important to pray consistently. Prayer should not be haphazard or just when you are in need, or feel like it. Try to include God in your life more and more. Prayer should become a lifestyle. Many times, throughout the day, we need to connect with God. "Acknowledge the Lord in all of our ways and he will make straight your paths." (Proverbs 3:6). Invite God in by talking to him wherever you are and wherever you go. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. The branch must be connected to the vine. There is a wonderful flow of sap in prayer that strengthens us to meet our daily challenges.

When you pray, don't just ask for things – remember to be grateful. It is especially important to make time to worship God for his goodness. Praise God for his mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love. Then, thank God for his abundant blessings. In your charity, pray for others. By all means pray on your own. However, hopefully you will progress and pray with others at the church of your choice. Praying with others can strengthen you as well as the community you are a part of. Find a community where you feel comfortable and at home and worship God there.

Prayer is more than speaking. Prayer is also listening. In time you will be more at home with silence. God whispers in our hearts. God communicates telepathically. His voice echoes in our conscience as well as in our minds. Do not be afraid of simply being still. Consenting to God's presence is prayer too.

Fasting

The 40 days of Lent is a season that, in some ways, imitates Jesus' fast in the desert. Fasting isn't easy. Here is what the Catholic Church requires:

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are obligatory days of fasting and abstinence (from meat) for Catholics. In addition, Friday's during Lent are obligatory days of abstinence.

For members of the Latin Catholic Church, the norms on fasting are obligatory from age 18 until age 59. When fasting, a person is permitted to eat one full meal, as well as two smaller meals that together are not equal to a full meal. The norms concerning abstinence from meat are binding upon members of the Latin Catholic Church from age 14 onward. Why does our Church require us to fast?

Many fast as a means of losing weight and cleansing their bodies from toxins. We fast to get more deeply in touch with God as well as to develop self-control. Giving up food also places us in solidarity with Jesus' fast in the desert as well as with those who are hungry. Fasting puts us in touch with the pangs of hunger. Our deepest hunger and thirst are for God. He poetically wrote: "My soul is athirst for God." (Psalm 42:22). We don't just live on bread alone. We need God. Fasting identifies for us that we are incomplete without God.

Fasting weakens our body but strengthens our spirit. Fasting is a deeply spiritual act. It is a way of seeking God.

Seek God through fasting. It has a rich history in every religious tradition. Spiritual masters have practiced and recommended fasting as part of their followers' spiritual discipline. As the spiritual Master, Jesus didn't say "if" you fast, but "when" you fast. As Jesus taught about fasting, he said it bolsters faith and brings spiritual power. (Matthew 17:21).

If you are struggling with an addiction and loss of self-control in other areas, try fasting. Once you start to discipline your appetites and gain some victory, you can extend out to other areas. Remember, self-control is not just about our willpower. This virtue is the fruit of the Spirit. Fasting and other areas of penance, are not all about our own will, but about our surrender to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the energy behind Lent; the Spirit will help us grow and gain mastery over ourselves.

Fasting also brings solidarity with those who do not know where their next meal is coming from. When we feel hunger, we can relate to what others are going through. When we sympathize with others, we develop compassion. In addition, we can identify with the pangs Jesus went through in the desert. As we fast, we are mystically united to the Son of God in his sufferings.

Wearing ashes on your forehead identifies you as being a Catholic externally, but fasting, on days of fasting and abstinence, brings an internal identification. Even if you are not attending Mass on that day, you are in communion with millions of Catholics who are also fasting. Do not be afraid to miss a meal or two and abstain from foods you love. Allow the pangs of discomfort to remind you of who you really are and what your deepest hunger is. Fasting and abstinence from meat is not easy. It is not meant to be! But this discipline can open you up to God more fully during this gracious season.

Almsgiving

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." (John 3:16). We show love and are most like God when we give. Our giving can take many forms, but one major way is when we share our money. There is biblical warrant for giving a tithe (10% of our income before taxes). The prophet Malachi says something beautiful about generosity: "Bring your tithes into the storehouse and test me, says God Almighty. I will open the windows of heaven for you and bless you!" (Malachi 3:10). Jesus affirms this when he teaches: "Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and overflowing, will be poured into your lap." (Luke 6:38).

We have all heard the teaching: "If you have a need, sow a seed." The sentiment is to give in order to get. This principle of giving is ironically true. God is never outdone in generosity. When we give, we will surely receive. Just like gravity is a law of nature, sowing and reaping is a spiritual law. You can expect abundance and blessings in God's timing and way. However, receiving more should not be our primary motivation for giving.

When we give to God, we want to do his will and support worthy causes. First, we should support our local Church community and its functions. When you go to a restaurant, you pay for what you eat. In a similar way, we should support the places that feed us spiritually.

Supporting worthy causes is one major reason why we give. We might want to participate in Habitat for Humanity, which provides housing for low income people. Perhaps there was a hurricane catastrophe, and you want to help the people devastated by that tragedy. There are many great causes eager for our support.

While the "windows of heaven" may be opened to us as we give and "abundance poured into our lap," these are ancillary reasons for giving. We don't give to get – we give because we want to honor God and help God. Giving expresses our faith. As we give, we define our identity. When Jesus saw the poor widow giving just two copper coins, he commented in a positive way about her motivation and heart. Although she gave very little, in reality she gave a lot! Giving is where the rubber meets the road when it comes to our interior life and faith. In some ways, we demonstrate our inner life as the level of our faith by our giving.

Giving goes against the idea of fattening your bank account and providing for your future. There is an interior joy in giving. It may not make sense but joy comes from giving. Jesus' words are completely true – it is more blessed to give! (See acts 20:35).

While money is important, God is more precious and valuable than money or riches. You are richly blessed in giving, but even if you are not, still give. Along with helping others in need, you experience growth and become Christ-like through giving. You are no longer selfish or miserly, and you find joy in your giving! Remember Scrooge on Christmas morning. That once miserly man found happiness in giving to others. Being generous gives you a new lease on life.

Many already give. This is God's will for us all. Continue to become more Christ-like through your financial giving. "Jesus, although rich, for your sake became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9). We can enrich others by our giving and demonstrate authentic love.

The Lenten season is about self-discipline and growing in virtue. Jesus taught: "Give alms and you will experience inner cleansing." (Luke 11:41). We become less selfish and develop a virtuous character when we share.

The season of Lent is a penitential season – penitential especially when we share. Almsgiving is something that should be secretive lest we receive our reward by having others notice us. When done correctly, it brings blessings to people and enriches our own lives exponentially. Penitential practices have great value. They are not just obligatory hardships to endure. They are not done primarily for the sake of austerity. Penitential activities help us to accomplish our Lenten goals of purification and enlightenment. The pillars of Lent are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. As we communicate with God, experience hunger, and share our resources, we will experience growth, become Christ-like, and be a blessing to many. To experience your best Lent ever, humble yourself and include these traditional practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Lenten Lessons:

- Penance is a traditional way to open ourselves up to God
- Be yourself: Pray in your own unique way with gratitude
- Fasting can slow you down and put you in touch with God
- When you are generous, you are most like God

Lenten Actions:

- Create a prayer space that is attractive, quiet, and comfortable
- Search out a worthy cause and give

