



## The Season of Lent: Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving

The Jews considered Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving as the cardinal works of the religious life. Lent is not just about the little sacrifices we make, but about discerning where our hearts are directed. The journey of Lent is an exodus, an exodus from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light. Today We call lent a forty days journey meditating on the sufferings of Christ and stations of the cross.

### Prayer

This one should be the easiest of the three. As Christians we are supposed to be praying anyway, so why make it a requirement? Because the sad truth is that many Christians do not pray, at least not with any regularity. When I was young and before I became a priest, I too was not praying for a very long time. Sure, I prayed when I went to church, and when I needed help taking a test at school or whenever I sped past a hidden highway patrolman. But just to give praise to the God who created me, or to adore His son who died for me? No, I was too busy for that. It wasn't like I thought of God and then just brushed Him aside. Had I thought of Him I would have prayed. It's just that I was so caught up in living my life that God became more of an afterthought than my savior. He became my divine security blanket, kept in the closet and only brought out when I was scared, or needed a favor.

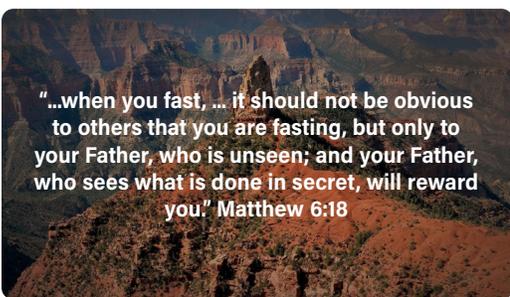
I believe that if you are honest with yourselves, you'd admit that at some point in your lives, you have done this too. This is the reason that the Church includes prayer in the pillars of Lent. It's to remind us that prayer is one of the most important things we do in our lives. In this Lenten season increase your prayer life, for your own benefit, for your family, and for the sake of the Church as a whole, and then look back. I guarantee you'll see much spiritual growth.



- Pray daily. Try to start every morning with a prayer. Pray before you fall asleep.
- If you are praying daily already then start adding a few more minutes a day to your prayer time.
- Attend daily Mass.
- Pray daily rosary, Divine Mercy chaplet, Stations of the Cross, and devotional prayer with your family.

### Fasting

Believe it or not, there are only two days of the year that Latin Rite Catholics are required to fast. One is Ash Wednesday and the other is Good Friday. In fact, both days are days of fasting and abstinence. What is the difference between the two, you may ask? On days of fasting, we are to eat only one meal, that can be breakfast, lunch or dinner. If needed, two smaller meals (not adding up to more than one regular meal) may be eaten at regular mealtime. No food is to be eaten between meals; this is a snack free day.



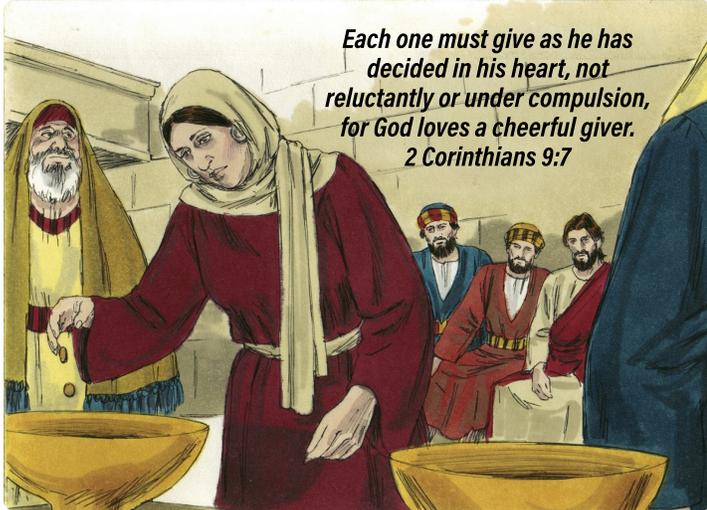
On days of abstinence, which are somewhat optional throughout the year, we are to abstain from eating meat. Almost everyone knows that Good Friday is a day of fasting, but a surprising number of people forget that Ash Wednesday is also. Fasting goes very well with prayer. It's like salt and pepper, they just work well together. One reason is that by fasting we deny our human appetites, both literally and figuratively, and can focus more intensely on our prayer. Jesus spoke of fasting in a way that assumes we are going to fast. He said, "when you fast" He said do it for your salvation. (Matthew 6:16). Jesus also speaks about fasting many more times in the Gospels. He even told the Apostles that some demons can only be driven out with fasting and prayer.

We must also be aware that while abstaining from meat, we may be breaking the spirit of the law if not the letter, by eating extravagant seafood. I must confess that I loved going to a fancy fish house on Good Friday, and would eat tons of seafood, all while feeling like I obeyed the law of abstinence just because I didn't have a steak. But if the point of abstaining from meat is to deny ourselves a legitimate good in order to focus on the sacrifice of Christ, I came to see this as the Pharisaical act that it was. Use your hunger to focus more clearly on Christ. Every time your stomach rumbles think about how hungry Jesus must have been during His forty days in the desert. How hungry was He while hanging on the cross? Allow your fasting to become a prayerful exercise.

## Almsgiving

Almsgiving is really just another name for charitable giving. Alms comes from a word that means “pity”, while charity comes from the Latin word “caritas”, that means love. That’s why in some translations of 1 Corinthians 13:13 it reads: “faith, hope, and charity.” Giving to charity is showing caritas, love, for our neighbor just as Jesus told us. Three passages from the New Testament come to mind regarding giving:

The first is from the gospel of Matthew and concerns giving to receive praise from others. This is not true charity and must be guarded against. “Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in



the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:1-4)

The second comes from Mark’s gospel. He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.” (Mark 12:41-44)

The third is from St. Paul where he tells the Corinthians to give with a generous heart, and not to give grudgingly. I’d

say more about this point but St. Paul says everything I’d need to say here. The point is this: “...he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work.” (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

As you can see, the Church really doesn’t put that much on us in way of Lenten requirements. During Lent we are to pray, fast, and give. How long, how intensely, and how much is up to each of us individually. I’d like to challenge myself, and everyone reading this, to go further this year. Sure, we can still give up chocolate or sodas, but let’s also take on something from each of the three pillars of Lent that will help us grow! Let’s pray more fervently, fast more often, and give more generously.

Lent is a humble descent, both inwards as we search ourselves and outwards as we reach out to others. It is about realizing that salvation is not an ascent to glory, but a descent, in love. It is about becoming little. His wounds were inflicted for our sake, and by those wounds we have been healed “For you had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.” (1 Pet 2:25; Is 53:5).

*"AS LENT IS THE TIME FOR GREATER LOVE,  
LISTEN TO JESUS' THIRST...  
'REPENT AND BELIEVE' JESUS TELLS US.  
WHAT ARE WE TO REPENT?  
OUR INDIFFERENCE, OUR HARDNESS OF HEART.  
WHAT ARE WE TO BELIEVE?  
JESUS THIRSTS EVEN NOW,  
IN YOUR HEART AND IN THE POOR --  
HE KNOWS YOUR WEAKNESS.  
HE WANTS ONLY YOUR LOVE,  
WANTS ONLY THE CHANCE TO LOVE YOU."*

*~ BLESSED TERESA OF CALCUTTA*



### Lenten Observation:

- **Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of fasting and prayer.**
- **Abstain from meat on all the Fridays of Lent.**
- **In Lent we pray the stations of the cross at 6:00 pm in the church.**
- **Bible study on all Fridays of Lent after the stations.**

I wish and pray for you all a fruitful Lenten journey.

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