

Homily for Ash Wednesday
Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption
February 26, 2020

Most Rev. Salvatore J. Cordileone

I am happy to welcome you all here in our Cathedral of St. Mary on this beautiful day, so important to us as Catholics, which is Ash Wednesday.

Today we begin this period of Lent. As in every year, on this day we hear these verses from the Gospel of St. Matthew, in which the Lord recommends to us the works we observe during Lent. But, in reality, they are not only works of Lent, but they are works that are part of Christian life in general.

We reflect a little on what our Lord recommends to us. He recommends us how to give alms. It is not for the glory of oneself, but to give glory to God. Giving alms: it is a generosity that one feels in a very concrete way, when one gives a part of one's money. But in the Bible's view it's not a loss of money, it's a profit. A profit in the sense of investment. This idea that he who gives alms to the poor is like investing money in the heavenly bank, to get an interest, to make God's love grow.

Almsgiving is a work of charity. All works of charity are like that, if one gives with a spirit of generosity, for the good of the other, not of oneself; not looking for a gain for himself, but to help the other. That is, to share the love of Christ, who gave himself all for us.

Works of charity are a part of Christian life throughout the year. But they have an emphasis during Lent.

So is prayer. Of course, prayer must be part of the Christian life every day, all year round, throughout one's life. But it has a focus during Lent, a special effort. If, for example, one is not in the habit of praying the Rosary daily, let him do so during Lent, in order to develop this habit in his life. Also, certain forms of prayer and devotions particular to Lent, especially the Way of the Cross, where we meditate on what the Lord did for us.

And above all in the sacramental life of the Church, to take advantage of the opportunity of the Sacrament of Confession, which is the Sacrament of Penance, the third work recommended to us by the Lord. Penance, and particularly fasting.

Fasting is more appropriate for Lent than in other times of the year.

But the spirit of penance is the Christian spirit. We always seek a continuous conversion, as we prayed during the opening prayer of this Mass; asking the Lord for this spirit of conversion, that is, of drawing ever closer to Him.

We must deny ourselves certain things, to open our hearts to the Lord.

We must take seriously what fasting means. It is refraining from taking food, skipping a meal during the day, or refusing to eat something we like. It is a penance that is felt in a very concrete way in one's own body. It is a reminder for us that we must give everything to the Lord, who gave everything for us.

Therefore, we begin this period of Lent: a period of grace, a period of love, a period to ask the Lord for his forgiveness and his favor, so that when we arrive at Easter, to celebrate the Resurrection, the new life we have in Jesus, we will be ready, with open hearts, for the love the Lord wants to give us.

We begin Lent with this ritual of the Ashes, the blessing and distribution of the Ashes, a sign of penance. They remind us of evil, which is sin, and that the Lord gives us the opportunity of conversion, with the grace of forgiveness.