

Ash Wednesday. 2/17/2021

**Your Father who sees in secret will repay you.**

“Return to me with your whole heart, says the Lord” And Saint Paul tells us, “We implore you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” These are words that refer to relationship. We may have similar expressions come to mind when somebody close to us distances herself. We may not say it, but it is our desire: Come back, let’s reconcile. Maybe you said something insensitive, or maybe did something that hurt you, but please let’s put that aside and reconcile, and feel at peace in the presence of each other, and enjoy once again each other’s company.

We were created for relationship, so that sharing with others is life-giving. At the start of Lent, God takes the

initiative to call us back to a close relationship with him.

We may feel that our relationship with him is ok, that we are fine, but this is a special time to look deeper. Are there pockets in my life that are off-limits in my relationship with God? Are there things that I rather keep to myself?

God created us and gave us life. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He wants to be very close to us and lead us to a happy life, to eternal life.

We view penitential practices in this context, to enter into the right relationship with God, to make that relationship stronger and purer. In the Gospel, Jesus talks about almsgiving, praying and fasting. These were commonly practiced by Jewish people in Jesus' time, as a way to live a pious life. Jesus does not question those practices. They

are a given. But he tells us that we need to act with the right intention. Penitence is about God and my relationship with him. Penitence is not about myself and my self-image, not about what I can accomplish.

It is interesting to note that in our times these penitential practices have secular forms. On the surface, fasting and dieting may look the same, but their goal is different.

Dieting can be a good and healthy thing, but the focus is on me. On the other hand, when we fast, when we give up something as a penitential act, we turn to God in love and tell him that he is more important than this or that thing, that we won't allow any object to stand in the way of our relationship. Fasting is not a test of our willpower, but an expression of love.

Almsgiving and philanthropy may look the same, but again they are different. Almsgiving is not about advancing a cause that I care about. Instead, it is about acknowledging that everything we have comes from God and we are to use material goods to take care of each other.

Even prayer is said to have a secular form, as a meditation practice where we get in touch with ourselves, to improve our focus and mental health. In our Gospel reading, Mark put prayer in the middle, at the center of our penitential acts. "Go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret." This is the intimate time of encounter. It can be for us like seeing a beloved friend after a time of being apart, setting aside all distractions and catching up. We can talk about things that have separated us and ask him to help us leave those things

behind. We can ask him to help us to grow in faith and get closer to him.

Let's enter the season of Lent in humility, trusting the Lord, responding to his call to a closer relationship, and preparing to accept the gift of eternal life that Jesus gained for us through the Pascal Mystery.