

## Ash Wednesday Message from Fr. Joe, 2020

The parades have ended in New Orleans – at least until St. Patrick’s Day. The leftover King Cake has been consumed – or frozen. The Mardi Gras revelry is over for another year. The Season of Lent, a season of remembering our mortality, turning away from sin and turning more fervently toward God, is here, and Lent holds a sacred place in our Catholic faith.

The tradition of beginning Lent by being marked with ashes dates to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. In Scripture, ashes are a reminder of human sinfulness and human mortality. Thus, the minister who imposes ashes can say, “Repent, and believe in the gospel” or “Remember you are dust and unto dust you shall return.”

The three great Lenten spiritual practices (designed to help us turn from sin and grow in faith and conversion) are Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving. In the gospel, Jesus reminds us that these are not practices to engage in to impress others or ourselves. Rather they are to help assist our interior transformation.

Prayer is the first and foundational spiritual practice of Lent. The person who doesn’t pray to God regularly will never grow in faith. Lent is the time to commit or recommit to prayer, to Sunday mass, to daily mass when possible, to Adoration, to the Rosary, to the Stations of the Cross, to spiritual reading or simply to sitting quietly in the presence of God. Don’t try to do it all. Pick one or two things and do them well. It’s about quality, not quantity. Otherwise, we will be tempted to treat prayer as a checklist rather than an occasion to grow in relationship with Jesus.

Fasting or Penance is the second great spiritual practice of Lent. The Church asks us to abstain from eating meat on Fridays in Lent (hardly a big deal in these parts) and to fast by eating only one full meal on two days of the season, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Obviously, these are minimal sacrifices.

The real sacrifice of Lent is to engage in meaningful penitential acts that help facilitate conversion. We voluntarily deny ourselves a pleasure so we can stop sinning and grow in a virtue like patience, humility, charity or purity. The theory of penance is this: If I can deprive myself voluntarily of something I enjoy (e.g. Ghirardelli chocolate), I can exercise discipline in other areas of my life where I struggle.

As a priest, I am impressed with the voluntary sacrifices that people offer up in Lent to grow in virtue. People give up desserts, coffee, soft drinks, fast foods, restaurant visits, alcohol and smoking. Some people eat only bread and drink only water one day a week. Some give up meat an extra day a week besides Friday. Some give up social media or TV on a particular day of the week or limit their social media time to an hour every day.

Pope Francis has suggested that we give up negative, critical, complaining talk and gossip during Lent. Penitential acts are valuable because they help us break patterns of sin. As Jesus said in Mark's Gospel, "Some demons can only be cast out through prayer – and fasting."

Almsgiving or Charity is the third great spiritual practice of Lent. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord calls us to "share our bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and homeless, clothe the naked, and not turn our back on our own." (Isaiah 58). St. Ambrose said "there must be a connection between fasting and almsgiving." The money we save by fasting – we give to the poor. There are many opportunities to help the poor through charitable outreach in and out of the church. In our own parish, we have Helping Hands Ministry, St. Vincent de Paul, and during Lent, Operation Rice Bowl.

In addition to the great Lenten spiritual practices of prayer, penance and charity, it is important to receive the sacrament of reconciliation during Lent, because Lent is *the* essential time to confess our sins and seek God's mercy. There will be many opportunities to receive the sacrament at St. Francis during this Lenten season.

The Opening Prayer (Collect) for today's mass sets out the Lenten agenda: "Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with **holy fasting** this **campaign of Christian service**, so that, as we take up **battle against spiritual evils**, we may be **armed with weapons of self-restraint**." The prayer says we are in a spiritual battle and we are asking God to arm us for war.

The Prayer over the Gifts for today's Mass says: "As we solemnly offer the annual sacrifice for the beginning of Lent, we entreat you, O Lord, that, through works of penance and charity, we may **turn away from harmful pleasures** and, cleansed from our sins, may become **worthy to celebrate devoutly the Passion of your Son**." These prayers indicate the Church has great expectations for each of us in Lent.

May we embark today on a meaningful Lenten campaign of prayer, penance, charity and reconciliation, so we can draw closer to Jesus and become more faithful to living the gospel. Grant us, O Lord, a transforming Lent.