



A message to the faithful of the archdiocese from Archbishop Michael Jackels

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Essentials of Christian life: prayer, penance and almsgiving

Prayer, penance, and almsgiving are essential elements of Christian life. This is demonstrated by Jesus' teaching in the gospel passage read on Ash Wednesday: not if, but when you do these things... (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18).

But you would think that penance is the most important of the three practices, as it is the only one about which the Church makes laws, regarding who must practice it, when, and how, with consequences for disobedience.

I don't know why there are Church laws about penance, or why there aren't any about prayer and almsgiving. Because penance in and of itself is not the most important of the three.

Let me be quick to add that I do not think there should be laws governing the practice of prayer, almsgiving, and penance. That inevitably leads to legalistic thinking, inspiring questions like: What is the minimum we have to do? What is the maximum we can get away with? That can't be good.

Back to the importance of prayer and almsgiving in relation to penance: consider how prayer is concerned with honoring God, and almsgiving with helping people in need, whereas penance is by itself only concerned with something I do or don't do, such as fasting or abstaining from meat.

To make sure penance is not all me-centered, worse yet, a source of pride for how austere my penances are, almsgiving is traditionally referred to as a companion to penance: we deprive ourselves of comfort in order to have the means to comfort people who are deprived, giving away the money that was saved by fasting.

So, even though the Church doesn't make laws about who must practice prayer and almsgiving, when, and how, they are nevertheless important, essential elements of Christian life.

A word, then, on prayer and almsgiving – first, prayer.

As already stated, prayer is concerned with honoring God. And more than that, it is conversation with God, which as with people, is the beginning of a personal relationship with God, and works to deepen that friendship.

By prayer we enter into the life of God, and invite God to enter into our lives; we possess God, and are possessed by God; and we are ultimately transformed from me into Thee. Which brings us back to the works of mercy, like almsgiving, because the very life of God is to give of oneself for the benefit of others.

We can use our own words to express things like love for God or sorrow for sins, and to present our petitions to God or give thanks for God's answer. Sometimes we pray without using words at all, just being with or looking to God. And sometimes we pray by using words composed by other people.

Enough for now. In future columns I would like to reflect on praying with the Rosary, with the Scriptures (lectio divina), and with the Eucharist in adoration.

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