

Ash Wednesday

The purifying walk to Good Friday

On Ash Wednesday, we receive ashes on our foreheads to remind ourselves of our sinfulness and our need for Jesus and what he did for us on Good Friday to redeem us from sin.

What will you do this Lent that will aid your spiritual growth? Here's a suggestion: Identify one fault — just one — and choose an activity or an abstinence that will help you overcome it.

In Joel 2:12-18, God beckons: "Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning." This scripture and Psalm 51 reassure us that God is merciful toward those who regret their sins so much that they repent. Dealing with our need to change can feel overwhelming and shameful, but if we keep our eyes on God's mercy, we feel helped, healed, and resurrected.

By identifying and working on just one sinful tendency (especially one that's been difficult to overcome), choosing one selfish behavior or one fear or one flaw or one unloving habit as our Lenten project, we can successfully give it to Jesus, nail it to his cross, and hear him offer it up to God as he cries out, "Father forgive them!" It will die with Jesus, and we'll be resurrected to a new life, a new level of holiness with Jesus.

To help us on the Lenten journey of purification, Jesus is giving us, in Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-18, a walking staff. It has three parts. The bottom of it is prayer; this is what grounds us. The middle section is fasting; this is what gives strength to the staff. The top section, like a shepherd's crook, is almsgiving; it bends our heavenward heart back to earth where we minister to the people God has placed in our lives.

ALMSGIVING is a gift we give to God in thanksgiving for his generosity to us. Jesus describes two different rewards: the repayment



received by hypocrites and the recompense given to those who are generous because they care. The latter are friends of God.

PRAYER can be motivated by right or wrong attitudes. Do we pray with pious words and appropriate gestures to get approval? Do we turn our attention to God only when we want him to grant us favors? Or is our prayer time truly an intimate exchange of love?

FASTING is worthwhile only if it improves our self-discipline so that we can resist sin and grow in holiness. The practice originated in Jewish history as a personal sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (the annual day for the forgiveness of sins). Today, fasting is recommended by the Catholic Church as a means of acquiring "mastery over our instincts and freedom of heart" (*Catechism* paragraph 2043). In other words, fasting helps us become holier.

By using this walking staff on our Lenten journey, we arrive at Easter with new holiness. Almsgiving converts our hearts by sacrificing our selfish attachments for the sake of others. Praying converts our hearts by sacrificing our selfish use of time for the love of God. And fasting converts our hearts by sacrificing our selfish pleasures, such as the enjoyment of food, for the strengthening of our spiritual maturity.

At the beginning of the journey, we do not wear ashes to look Catholic. It's a sign that we know we need to change!