

## How to Experience Victory Over Suffering this Lent

### A Reflection On Ash Wednesday

What suffering are you enduring? When we realize that we can unite ourselves to the passion and death of Jesus, by connecting our experiences to his, we experience the same triumphant victory that he did. We have our own "resurrections".

This Lent can be a journey of walking from grief to healing and from anger to peace. Day by day, step by step, Jesus will help you rise above your cross. It will happen in the discovery of the redemptive holiness that comes through the activities of Lent and awaits you in Holy Week. If you make it a priority, you will receive tremendous blessings.

In today's Gospel reading (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18), Jesus gives us a walking staff for this journey. It has three parts. The top section, like a shepherd's crook, is almsgiving — this is what bends our heavenward heart back to earth as we turn our sufferings into ministries that help others. The middle section is fasting — this is what gives strength to the staff. The bottom of it is prayer — this is what grounds us.

**ALMSGIVING** is a gift that we give to God in thanksgiving for his generosity toward us. Jesus describes two different "rewards": (1) the repayment received by the Pharisees and (2) the recompense given to those whose generosity is based on love. Those who give lovingly are friends of God, and since friends share freely with each other, we are generous with our money, our time, our patience, or whatever others need that God has given to us. Such love opens our hearts to receive more of God's love. For example, when we give to others mercy and



forgiveness, we receive more of God's mercy and forgiveness.

**PRAYER** can have a right or wrong attitude. Do we pray with pious words and folded hands to get people's approval? Do we make the sign of the cross or recite formula prayers repeatedly because we think it will convince God to pay us heed? Or is our prayer time truly an intimate communication with the One who loves you most?

**FASTING** is valuable only if it helps us grow spiritually. If we fast so that others will think we're good Catholics, it's worthless. Fasting originated in Jewish history as a personal sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (the annual day for the forgiveness of sins) to show God humility and repentance. Today, it's meant to help us gain mastery over ourselves for the sake of self-improvement, enabling us to walk further into conversion.

This three-part walking staff is necessary for our journey, because it aids our conversion. Almsgiving converts our hearts when it involves sacrificing our material goods for the sake of loving others. Praying converts our hearts when it involves sacrificing our selfish use of time for the sake of loving God. Fasting converts our hearts when it involves sacrificing our selfish pleasures, represented by our enjoyment of food, for the strengthening of our spiritual nature and our holiness.