

Ash Wednesday “Getting Ready for Lent”

Fr. Frank Schuster

I found a poem I like entitled “Getting Ready for Lent”

If you can start the day without coffee,
If you can understand when loved ones are too busy to give you time,
If you can take criticism and blame without resentment,
If you can face the world without lies and deceit,
If you can relax without beer wine or liquor,
If you can sleep without brooding over the day’s events,

If you can do all these things,
Then you are probably the family dog!

And now for a Lenten prayer that I like to pray daily: "So far today, God, I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, I haven't lost my temper. Haven't been grumpy, nasty or selfish. I'm really glad of that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed; and from then on, I'm probably going to need a lot of help."

Yes, my friends, today marks the beginning of Lent. Lent is a season when we journey with Jesus for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert, focusing on the three virtues of prayer, penance and almsgiving. We spend more time in prayer because our relationship with God begins first and foremost with spending time with God in prayer, in particular, giving thanks to God for the gift of life and interceding for the needs of others. We practice penance, realizing that there is more to the world than meets the eye. By denying ourselves something we strengthen our will in other areas of our life. We practice almsgiving, because everything we have is a gift from God and it is a good thing to help those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

With prayer, the best kind of prayer is the prayer of the heart when we simply talk to God like we would talk to anyone we truly loved and to allow for periods of silence when the Lord is given the opportunity to communicate to our hearts, as His custom, in a way that transcends the need for words. The rosary is a helpful prayer because it is like a mantra that erases from the mind the daily clutter we accumulate every day. Daily reading of scripture is also helpful, even if it looks like focusing on just one book perhaps or randomly hopping around from story to story. These are a few suggestions among many different ways we can pray.

With penance, the church gives a minimum expectation, as follows: Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 are obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. All Catholics 14 years old and older must abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and all the Fridays of Lent. Fasting as explained by the U.S. bishops means partaking of only one full meal. Some food (not equaling another full meal) is permitted at breakfast and around midday or in the

evening—depending on when a person chooses to eat the main or full meal. Abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, milk products or condiments made of animal fat. Fish is OK because the resurrected Lord ate fish with the disciples and the early Christians used the fish symbol as a symbol of being Christians. This was in part due to the handy acronym found in the Greek word for fish, Jesus Christ Son of God Savior.

As I share every year, I think people get caught up on the soft ball approach the bishops give us in these expectations. It is good to remember that these are the minimum expectations meant to make this season accessible to the most amount of people: it is OK to be vegetarian on days of fasting and abstinence, the Fridays during Lent, and to eat less than what is expected provided we are in good health. And if we accidentally forget to abstain on one of these days, that is why God created tomorrow! At first if you don't succeed, try, try again! It is also OK to include, in addition, the practice of taking up a new practice that in time may become a habit, like praying a decade of the rosary each day, a little scriptural reading each day, engaging in spiritual reading, performing random acts of kindness, you get the picture.

Meanwhile, why do we practice penance? It is not because we are masochistic. We do this because it is good to remind ourselves at least a couple times a year: who is in control of our bodies. A suggestion: take some habitual comfort that you practice each day and abstain from it for a day. It doesn't matter what that habitual comfort is per se. What matters is that it has become habitual. The practice of abstaining from something that is habitual helps us to strengthen our will. We know the saying: the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. When it comes to abstaining from something habitual we can discover that the spirit is just as weak as the flesh at times. Little practices of abstaining from something habitual for a day, or a week for that matter, strengthens our will power, making us spiritually stronger. This is why we practice penance. It is good for the soul.

When it comes to almsgiving: There are a number of ways, whether we support St. Vincent de Paul, our African orphans, Catholic Relief Services Rice Bowl program, the food bank, or something that is going on at work, school, or in the community, we are giving responsibly to organizations that know how to best care for the great needs of the poor. The Rice Bowl program is fun in that we simply put our change into the Rice Bowl box each day during Lent. The change can make a real difference in the lives of the people living below the poverty line in 3rd world countries.

After the homily, we will be marking everyone who desires with ashes, remembering that we are dust and to dust we shall return. The purpose of this practice is to remind ourselves that one day we will die. We simply do not have all the time in the world. The ego does not like to think about such things. However, for Christians, such thoughts are not morbid but rather an invitation to consider what is really important in life. The ashes on our foreheads, and the entire season of Lent, are meant to also remind us to never take for granted the relationships we have in

life. The ashes remind us to not put off to tomorrow what we should be doing today in our vocation of loving God and loving the people in our lives.

And so, Lent begins. Do we dare? Do we dare enter into this season with an open heart? Will we reach Easter Sunday with our hearts prepared to welcome the risen Lord? It is best not to wait to begin our Lenten observance. After all, Lent, like life, always seems shorter than we think. For Christians, we welcome this reality because lent, like life, does not end with the cross, but with the resurrection.