

Ash Wednesday “A Fitting Beginning to Lent”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Here is a poem that I like that is entitled “Getting Ready for Lent” from the author “Anonymous”.

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! The end.

And now for a daily Lenten prayer you might find useful: "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 into the desert, focusing on the three virtues of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Ash Wednesday is a fitting way to begin Lent, because today we have been called to do all three with enthusiasm, getting us off on the right foot. We spend more time in prayer because our relationship with God begins first and foremost with spending time with God in prayer. We not only give thanks to God for our many blessings; we also turn to God for spiritual growth. However, when we pray during Lent, we also must not forget to intercede for the needs of others. We are making this journey into Lent together as Church, never in isolation. We also practice penances like fasting so to remember 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. It is not enough to just prayerfully intercede for others, we should also be there for others with our time, talent, and treasure.

With prayer, for me, 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.

When it comes to fasting, 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. If you messed up today, I give you permission to try again tomorrow.

It is also 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 do more, and it is OK the change things up as Lent progresses. The Holy Spirit does that sometimes. He sometimes sends us in a different direction along the way, perhaps instead of just giving something up, he challenges us to take on something new that can deepen our spirituality or perhaps even sign up for a service opportunity so to help make life better for others. The point being: remember that it is the spirit of Lent that matters. Ash Wednesday is a fitting way to begin.

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. This moment should remind us that we simply do not have all the time in the world. However, for Christians, such thoughts are not morbid but rather an invitation to take stock in what is most important in life. The ashes on our foreheads, and the entire season of Lent, are meant to also remind us to never take the gift of life and the gift of a relationship with the Lord for granted. The ashes therefore also 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. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving put us on the right foot.

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? Ash Wednesday reminds us that 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 and new life.