

Ash Wednesday

Ashes signify our sin and our mortality. We wear them to indicate our guilt and our grave. Today begins six weeks of common penance. We enter Lent together, mutually honest about our sin and sharing the inescapability of our death. We also encourage one another with faith that God, who made us, loves us, forgives us, and redeems us.

Jesus spoke about three disciplines that now serve as practical guideposts for Lent: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. In each case, Jesus acknowledged that his disciples were doing these things: They were giving alms, they were praying, they were fasting. They did so because they expected a reward. In principle, Jesus had no problem with that. But he cautioned they might have been seeking the wrong reward: impressing other people, who saw these actions, instead of impressing God, who saw their purpose.

What each of us does for the next six weeks is largely up to us, but taking Jesus' words at face value is a good starting point.

First, give alms. Our diocese recommends that we each tithe, giving 10% of our income to charity, and in this way: 5% to our parish, 1% to our diocese and 4% to other charities. Some people struggle to do this; others can give more. One project for Lent this year could be, do the math. Look at the actual numbers of your income and your giving. Then give alms.

Second, pray. If going to Sunday Mass and receiving communion each week is not your habit, then your 6-week resolution is a no-brainer. It is time to fix your schedule. One project for Lent this year could be this: look back over your calendar since Christmas and see how often you participated at Sunday Mass. Then make this appointment for the weeks ahead. If Sunday Mass is already your habit, you may branch out with something else each day to pray.

Third, fast. The Church asks relatively little. We fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday—eating smaller quantities of food on those days. And we abstain from meat on those same days as well as all the Fridays of Lent. Many people do something more. They fast from bad habits and activities, some of which may need the support of a counselor. That's all good, but observing some dietary restriction for six weeks is an excellent practice. It reminds us every meal every day that this is a holy time, a time to reflect on sin and death.

Being faithful to six weeks of Lent can train us to develop good habits and refrain from bad ones. Remember, Jesus was not content with people who merely performed these disciplines. He wanted us to do them for the right purpose—not to win the esteem of others, but the repayment that comes from God.