

Penance: Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving

Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, calls us to pray, to fast, and to give alms: *'when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites,' 'when you fast, do not look gloomy,' 'when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing'* (Mt 6:5,16,3 respectively). As a Church, we ponder and pray over this call every Ash Wednesday. In a most profound way, the three spiritual exercises identified by Jesus are directed toward the nurturing of relationships.

Prayer, that process of listening to and responding to God's daily call, sustains and nurtures our relationship with our triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Without prayer, personal and communal, this relationship is diminished, sometimes to the point of complete silence on our part. Every day the Spirit of Jesus invites us to enter into that serious conversion that leads to blessed communion.

Fasting, a very special form of penance, and Jesus' second call, has been a consistent part of our Catholic tradition. Fasting assists us in getting our own house in order. All of us have to deal with areas of servitude, whether in regard to smoking or alcohol consumption, misused sexuality, uncontrolled gambling, psychological hang-ups, spiritual obsessions, use of stimulants, immoderate use of the Internet, excessive amounts of television watching, or preoccupations with other forms of entertainment. By fasting and self-denial, by living lives of moderation, we have more energy to devote to God's purposes and a better self-esteem that helps us to be more concerned with the well-being of others.

Almsgiving, the third call of the Lord is to give alms. Jesus was always concerned about those who were poor and in need. He was impressed by the widow who, though having so little, shared her resources with others: "I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood" (Lk 21:3-4). To be a disciple of Christ means to live a life of charity.

Our culture is in great need of justice and charity, virtues that cannot be achieved without grace and openness to conversion. There are always unconverted areas of minds and hearts; there are always factors in our social structures that need uprooting, repair, or restoration. All of us are called to participate in this evangelizing work of transforming our world.

Forms of Penance -- Fasting—By refraining from eating, we signify our oneness with the Lord, acknowledge our need for conversion, and give witness to our solidarity with those less fortunate. Catholics who are eighteen years and older and in good health are bound until their fifty-ninth birthday by the obligation to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Traditionally, the canonical obligation of fasting has been understood in the Church as the taking of only one full meal a day.

Abstinence—In the United States, this penitential practice consists of refraining from the consumption of meat. The Latin Church's requirement of abstinence binds Catholics after they have celebrated their fourteenth birthday, and it is practiced on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and the Fridays during Lent.

Pastors and parents are encouraged to see that children who are not bound by the obligation to fast and abstain are led to appreciate an authentic sense of penance.

[It should also be pointed out that some persons are traditionally exempted from fasting and abstinence: those of unsound mind, the sick, pregnant or nursing women, and manual laborers according to need.]

Penitential Seasons

Lent—During this forty-day period each year, the Church unites itself to the mystery of Jesus in the desert. To prepare to celebrate the Easter mysteries, we devote time during this special season to pray, to perform works of charity, and to deny ourselves by fulfilling obligations more faithfully.

Penitential Days

Ash Wednesday—This day marks the beginning of the Lenten season. The imposition of ashes is an ancient penitential practice symbolizing our dependence upon God's mercy and forgiveness. Ash Wednesday is a day of fast and abstinence in the Church.

Good Friday & Holy Saturday—Christ suffered and died for our salvation on Friday. On the Friday that we call "Good," the Church gathers to commemorate Jesus' Passion and death. Good Friday is a day of fast and abstinence. The Good Friday fast is the Paschal fast—a fast of anticipation and longing for the Passover of the Lord, which should continue, when possible, through the Paschal (Easter) Vigil on Holy Saturday.

Fridays During Lent—In the United States, the tradition of abstaining from meat on each Friday during Lent is maintained.

Fridays Throughout the Year—In memory of Christ's suffering and death, the Church prescribes making each Friday throughout the year a penitential day. All of us are urged to prepare appropriately for that weekly Easter that comes with each Sunday.

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