

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This week is Ash Wednesday. While Lent is later than usual this year, it still seems like it just “snuck up” on me! On Wednesday we will hear Jesus tell us how to fast, give alms, and pray. These three things have been taken up by the Church as practices for Lent. It is important, though, to remember that these are not the “end” – the purpose of Lent – but the *means* to a greater end.

So what is that *end*? *Union with Jesus Christ*.

This should shape our choices for Lent. What do we choose to give up (fasting)? How do we choose to reach out in love and service (almsgiving)? Will we take extra time for God (prayer)? If, at the end of Lent, we’re exactly the same as when we started Lent, then we missed the point. We’re supposed to grow closer to Christ, not “tread water.” So if you do the same things you always have done, why would you expect a better result?

I remember one year, after much prayer, it was put onto my heart that I needed to double my private prayer time for Lent. After arguing with the Lord for a while, I ended up doing it. It meant getting up really early (for me, anyway), and spending that extra time with the Lord before I began my day. I’ll tell you: by the third week of Lent, I was exhausted! I was having a hard time concentrating, and didn’t think I could persevere much longer. I said as much to God. That day, most of my appointments canceled, and I found I had time to get a nap. After a couple days of the Lord taking care of my needs in this way, I said to Him, “So you really want me to keep doing this, huh?” I got a very strong sense that the answer was “Yes!” I also knew at that point, that this was not a Lenten practice only, but a change of life God was asking of me. From that time, I found a deeper intimacy with God, and a deeper trust that if He was asking something of me, He would provide the grace in superabundance.

So what is God asking of you this Lent? God calls each of us to different things, but look at the areas of fasting, almsgiving and prayer.

Fasting: What might God be calling you to give up? What is standing in the way of your relationship with Christ? Do you find that you are addicted to e-mail or social media? Do you find that you end up “binge watching” Netflix? Does YouTube take too much of your time? Maybe you are being asked to give up or limit your consumption of these things in Lent. Do you find that you go to food for comfort and consolation? Maybe you are to do a special fast in Lent to learn to go to Jesus for comfort and consolation when you’re feeling empty. What is the change of life? Going to God in our emptiness, learning to rely on Him more, instead of on finite things.

Almsgiving: How might God be asking you to reach out in love during Lent? If you find you have too much “stuff,” you may be called to go through your wardrobe or house and donate much of what is not used (or even, maybe, things you *do like and use*) to the poor (maybe through a St. Vincent de Paul Society or Lazarus House). You may find that you are called to reach out in love by volunteering at a food pantry or soup kitchen. You may decide to give up some of your hard-earned money (which symbolizes stability, security, energy, intelligence and time) to a charity. Again, what is the hoped change of life? Growing in love in action, and maybe making this love-in-action a habitual part of our lives.

Prayer: How might God be asking you to spend more time with Him this Lent? You might try coming to daily Mass once a week, if you attend only weekend Masses. Maybe you will spend time meditating on Christ’s love as lived in His Passion, through the Way of the Cross. It might that you don’t have a consistent prayer life, and so decide to set aside a specific amount of time every day dedicated only to God. If you do have a consistent prayer life, you may decide to extend it (as I did), so that you have more time to be with the One who loves you to death! There are so many possibilities. The hoped for change in life: growing in intimacy with God and creating or strengthening life-long habits of prayer.

With Lent coming, there is so much potential! Whatever you choose to do this Lent, make sure it is focused on the long-term (how will this help me to get closer to God in my life, not just Lent), but is also practical (don’t take on too much... it will overwhelm you and you’ll fail).

A blessed Lent to you!