

ASH WEDNESDAY

Ash Wednesday is a special Day of Atonement. Our celebration today takes its name from the Jewish practice of doing penance wearing “sackcloth and ashes.” The Church tells us to observe Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as days of fasting and abstinence.

Fasting is prescribed to reinforce our penitential effort during the Lenten season. It gives us additional moral and spiritual strength. Fasting offers us more time to be with God in prayer. It encourages us to share our food and belongings with the needy.

The prophet Joel in our first reading insists that we should experience a complete conversion of heart, and not simply feel regret for our sins. Even now says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments and return to the Lord, your God. Saint Paul in the second reading also advises us “to become reconciled to God.”

The three traditional pillars of the process of conversion and renewal are recaptured in today's Gospel reading: prayer, fasting and alms-giving. We gain renewal by seeking to be united with the one who is our strength, and who knowing our human nature told us that cut off from him we can do nothing.

Our success in whatever discipline we choose for ourselves during this lent depends so much on our dedication to prayer. The Church is also encouraging us to strengthen our will-power, to teach it to say no to what we know to be wrong and yes to what is right. That way, we are better equipped to live by the dictates of the Gospel. We take up the discipline of fasting and abstinence, much in the same way as an athlete carries out rigorous physical exercise in order to strengthen the body.

In this season of Lent, let us also train ourselves on the all-important commandment of love. Let us learn to overcome our selfishness and to be more considerate to the needs of our neighbors through alms-giving.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, as we plan on what we are going to give up during this Lenten season, let us also plan on the virtues we are going to pick up so as to have a replacement for what we have given up. And let us do whatever we are doing with the right intention, not to be seen and praised by our fellow human beings but to be seen and rewarded by God who knows how to reward each person.

As we begin the season of Lent today, let us ask God to help us to use this opportunity to be reconciled with him and to one another, so as to draw ourselves closer to him.