

Stewardship in Action at St. Bernard

February 2016



LENT: A TIME TO GROW IN MERCY

We are in Lent—that special time established by the Church to prepare for the celebration of Easter with an itinerary of more intense spiritual training. Easter marks the most miraculous of all moments, when Christ defeated death by his Resurrection and opened to mankind the glory of salvation. It is most appropriate that we as Catholics dedicate ourselves to spiritual growth during this Lenten season that is now upon us. Traditionally this discipline is marked by three elements—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Lent offers us opportunities to grow ever deeper in mercy.

WHY WE FAST

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in a 2009 reflection, focused on fasting, calling it “a great help to avoid sin and all that leads to it.” This is a powerful statement about the efficacy of self-denial. Pope Benedict went on to say that in the modern world we’ve tended not to value the spiritual fasting component of Lent as much as we once did, in the centuries when stricter rules of fasting and abstinence applied. When we do fast, he noted, it’s often linked to our own physical wellbeing, such as when people fast to lose weight. While the benefits to the body can be appreciated, they are, by design, attending to our own will. Benedict instructs us that the true fast is directed to “eating the true food, which is to do the Father’s will.” How is your Lenten fasting—spiritual and physical—bringing you closer to God’s will?

For us as Christians, our fasting is not the avoidance of food because the things of this world are not inherently good. It is in fact because they are inherently good that our sacrifice for the even greater good of deepening our encounter with Christ is so wonderful. By fasting, we are in a better position to embrace the other two components of our Lenten discipline—prayer and almsgiving. Training our mind and body to accept some sacrifice of material pleasure enables us to use that same disciplinary act of will to focus more intently on prayer.

INCLINED TO PRAYER

Lent is a particularly good time to incline our prayer life toward repentance, thanksgiving, and praise. Our human nature often moves us to limit our prayers to our “want list.” We continually ask our Lord for more and more blessings! Now this kind of prayer is also appropriate; after all, Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock and it will be open to you” (Matthew 7:7). However, we should take care that our prayers of supplication not comprise the entirety of our prayer life. This is, again, a reflection of our own will. Our family, our friends, our acquaintances and indeed the whole world need and will benefit from our prayers.

Without prayer, fasting is not complete fasting; it’s simply going hungry.
– Joseph B. Wirthlin

Indeed, we can see how powerful our Lenten actions can be when we reflect upon the disciples’ frustration with their inability to cast out the demon in the boy with the mute spirit. When they asked Jesus why they could not expel the evil spirit, he replied, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29). How powerful a weapon we have available to us in our spiritual combat! How can you combine prayer and fasting in these last days of Lent to benefit those in need of God’s grace and hope?

THE MERCY OF GIVING

Our prayer and fasting also are linked to almsgiving in a meaningful way. Turning again to Pope Benedict, he states, “By freely embracing an act of self-denial, we make a statement that our brother or sister in need is not a stranger.” When we turn from our own wants and desires, we can more clearly see our existing blessings and the need to share with our fellow pilgrims in the spiritual journey.

We can practice almsgiving in many forms. A most effective method is to consider the Catholic principle of subsidiarity—that it is best to address any problem at the local level if possible. Our parishes have programs to assist the needy; we can adjust our priorities to insure our ministries are sufficiently funded to provide adequate help. Most of us have folks with needs right in our communities. Certainly there are no dioceses where want or need is absent, so our annual appeals from the chancery take on a more human dimension when we consider those in need. The same applies worldwide—the Church has organizations that provide basic necessities around the world and we are called to support these endeavors if we are to truly live out the faith we proclaim.

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RETURNING SOON -THE STEWARDSHIP TREE!

You remember the “**Stewardship Tree.**” Our parish ministries often have a need for some short-term assistance on specific projects, but find it difficult to find people to help. The **Stewardship Tree** is a great way to take a “test drive” with a ministry. If you wondered what a particular ministry is like, but did not feel you could commit for a significant length of time, the **Stewardship Tree** lets you dip your toe into the water of community service.

The *Stewardship Council* is pleased to announce that the **Stewardship Tree** will return again for the Lenten season. It will contain a variety of brief, specific service opportunities to enhance your spiritual preparations for Easter. Each “leaf” on the tree contains a brief description of the volunteer opportunity and a contact name/number for information. Aligned to 2016’s designation as a *Jubilee Year of Mercy*, the volunteer opportunities will be aligned to either the corporal or spiritual works of mercy.

To encourage participation by parishioners of all ages, there will be “leaves” designated for youth and different “leaves” for adults. Parishioners in need of assistance are invited to place a “leaf” on the tree detailing their request for assistance.

The Stewardship Tree will be in the narthex on the following weekends during Lent:

February 27-28

March 5-6

March 12-13

Please take this opportunity to choose the volunteer opportunity you wish to accomplish and take the entire “leaf” home as a reminder.



Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others, you open God's ear to yourself.

– St. Peter Chrysologus

LENT - A TIME TO GROW IN MERCY (CONTINUED)

What better role model for us than our current Pope Francis? As Archbishop of Buenos Aires he was well known for his ventures into the city to meet and help the poor. As pope, his ability to slip away is limited, but his resources have expanded. He sends his personal almoner—a priest tasked with distributing alms directly to those in need in the pope’s name—to every corner of Rome. At Pope Francis’s request, the homeless have been given warm sleeping bags, and showers and a barber are available in the public bathrooms in St. Peter’s Square. On his birthday, Pope Francis invites the homeless to lunch with him at his residence, and on Holy Thursday he washes the feet of prisoners. How can you follow his example by reaching out to those in need with practical, prayerful help?

The history of our faith provides abundant examples of how Lenten sacrifices, eagerly embraced, can provide untold enhancements to our spiritual life. Even if we have not yet adopted some Lenten disciplines, it’s not too late.

We can begin today!

Interested in learning more about the Stewardship Council?

Please contact Mark Dransfield (mlrek@optonline.net or by calling 908-526-6649)
