



What Suffering Are You Enduring?

A reflection on Ash Wednesday

Suffering, unfortunately, is something that we all experience. But when we unite ourselves to the passion and death of Jesus, by connecting our experiences to his, we will also experience victory, resurrection, and a worthwhile value for our hardships.



This Lent, let's walk from grief to healing and from anger to peace, which is only possible by uniting ourselves to the passion of Christ. Day by day we will journey with Jesus as he teaches us to rise above our crosses by first embracing them in redemptive holiness and then by entering into the resurrection of Christ. Thus, we will discover tremendous blessings that we cannot yet imagine.

In Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18, Jesus gives us a walking staff for this journey. It has three parts. The top section, like a shepherd's crook, is almsgiving – this is what bends our heavenward heart back to earth as we turn our sufferings into ministries that help others. The middle section is fasting – this is what gives strength to the staff. The bottom of it is prayer – this is what grounds us.

ALMSGIVING is a gift that we give to God in thanksgiving for his generosity toward us. Jesus describes two different "rewards": (1) the repayment received by the Pharisees and (2) the recompense given to those whose generosity is based on love. Those who give lovingly are friends of God, and since friends share freely with each other, we are generous with our time, our patience, our talents, our money, or whatever else God has given to us that others need. Such love opens our hearts to receive more of God's love.

PRAYER can be motivated by a right attitude or a wrong attitude. Do we pray with pious words and appropriate gestures in order to get people's approval? Do we make the sign of the cross when we pray because we think it will improve our chances to get what we asked for? Do we recite formula prayers over and over to convince God to pay us heed? Or is our prayer time truly an intimate communication with the One whom we cherish most dearly?

FASTING is valuable only if it helps our spiritual life. If we fast so that others will think we're good Catholics, it's worthless. Fasting originated in Jewish history as a personal sacrifice on the Day of Atonement – the annual day for the forgiveness of sins – to show God humility and repentance. Today, fasting is recommended by the Church as a means of acquiring "mastery over our instincts and freedom of heart" (*Catechism* paragraph 2043). In other words, fasting helps us enter into greater conversion.

This three-part walking staff is necessary for our journey, because it enables us to deepen our on-gong conversion. Almsgiving converts our hearts when it involves sacrificing our material goods for the sake of loving others. Praying converts our hearts when it involves sacrificing our selfish use of time for the sake of loving God. Fasting converts our hearts when it involves sacrificing our selfish pleasures, represented by our enjoyment of food, for the strengthening of our spiritual nature and our holiness.

Use this space for an invitation, e.g.:
Join us for Mass
Join us for the
Lenten Parish Mission