

# The best Lent ever

It's hard to believe, isn't it? Lent is around the corner. The mere mention of "Lent" can seem dismal, like a long, dreary day. In fact, Lent consists of 40 days and 40 nights of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Who can endure it?

Yet the word "Lent" does not pertain to darkness or despair. Quite the opposite. The original meaning of the word actually has to do with springtime. When Lent begins, it's winter. But by the time Lent concludes, the days are growing longer and the forsythia are in bloom. Even if there is an unseasonal snow shower, we take heart because winter is having its last gasp. Lent, then, represents a new springtime in our spiritual lives. It's a time when the darkness of sin is to give way to new light of grace.

When we look at Lent as the herald of a new springtime in our spiritual lives, then, I would hope, Lenten practices would no longer seem like unwelcome intrusions into our comfort. Rather, they are harbingers of hope for a more Christ-centered way of life. These penitential practices are indicators and tools of God's mercy, a mercy which is always available to us, that divine mercy which has the power to transform our way of life. With that in mind, let's briefly review the three principal Lenten practices, with our eyes fixed on the goal of renewed spiritual joy and greater holiness of life.

Let's begin with prayer, conversation with God. There are many ways to pray but let's concentrate on one: quiet, silent prayer, when we are alone with God and his voice echoes in our hearts. Such prayerful solitude requires us to turn off all our electronic devices, to block out distractions, and simply to ask the Lord to let us see ourselves as he sees us.

This is more than self-awareness. It is asking the Lord to help us measure our lives not according to our standards but to his. It is humbly asking the Lord for grace and inner strength to confront our overt sins as well as that hidden corruption that we often conceal not only from others but even from ourselves. Such prayer leads me to seek the Lord's mercy and to make an unburdening confession of my sins. Lent is pre-eminently the time to grow in prayer and in praying to reconnect with the

sacrament of reconciliation.

A second Lenten practice is fasting or some other form of bodily mortification. This isn't the same as dieting. Rather, depriving ourselves of food is connected with the arduous process of emptying our inner selves of everything that obstructs the grace of God from working in us and through us. Fasting has a way of helping us uproot our deep-seated habits of sin and our endless desire for comfort, convenience, power and esteem. The discipline of foregoing food or other comforts is a way of tilling the soil of our souls, making them receptive to God's Word.

A final Lenten practice is almsgiving, which includes giving of ourselves and our resources to those who are in need. The practice of charity is how we open the window of our souls to God's love, forgetting our own wants and needs and concentrating instead on the needs of others, especially the poor and vulnerable.

When we open our hearts in love to those in need, the stale air of self-centeredness dissipates as the fresh air of Jesus' self-giving love circulates through our inmost being, and we are thus spiritually reinvigorated.

Prayer, fasting, almsgiving: three inseparable ways to experience a renewed life in Christ and joy in the Holy Spirit. May this be the best Lent ever!