

## **(...) The Three Pillars of Lent**

By Jamie Rose Bell (Mar 3, 2025)

*When our New Year's resolutions fail, do we give them another go at Lent? Is Lent just a Catholic self-improvement program or is there more to it than that? As we prepare to enter this Lenten season, let's re-examine what Lent is all about.*

During the liturgical season of Lent — this year beginning on Ash Wednesday (Mar. 5) - Catholics are invited into the spiritual desert to remain with Jesus during his temptation by Satan. Quadragesima, the Latin word for Lent, which translated means “fortieth,” signifies the 40 days in which Jesus endured the accusations of Satan in the Judean wilderness. During these days of preparation leading up to Easter, we are reinvited to “build our house upon the rock” of Jesus Christ, “for no other foundation can anyone lay... than that which is Jesus Christ” (Matthew 7:24, 1 Corinthians 3:11). Upon this firm foundation, the Church proposes the building of three spiritual pillars: prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

### **Prayer**

The gospel evangelists recount that it was the “spirit” that drove Jesus out into the wilderness where He was tempted. The Holy Spirit likewise draws each of us deeper into prayer during this holy season: so deep as to pierce our hearts.

In a letter to her Missionary of Charity Sisters, Mother Teresa wrote, “I worry some of you still have not really met Jesus - one to one - you and Jesus alone. We may spend time in chapel but have you seen with the eyes of your soul how He looks at you with love? Do you really know the living Jesus - not from books but from being with Him in your heart?”

During Lent, God desires to draw us into heart-to-heart conversation with him. For some of us this may be taking the first step of scheduling time to devote to prayer. For others who already have a steady prayer life, it could mean being honest with God about things we have avoided addressing or giving Him permission to heal a deep wound.

What it looks like to open oneself to God in prayer is unique to each person, but there are many time-tested forms of prayer - think thousands of years - that the tradition of the Church points us to. Meditation on and contemplation of Sacred Scripture, often called *lectio divina*, praying the rosary, the Stations of the Cross and the Liturgy of the Hours are all “go-to” Catholic prayers. While prayer can be practiced anywhere, praying before Jesus in Eucharistic Adoration is particularly powerful.

During Lent, our time in prayer may open our eyes to lies that have bound us in fear or areas where we are vulnerable to temptation. Like Jesus, we may also find ourselves confronting the accusations of Satan. In this case, it is important to follow Christ's example. Jesus never responded to Satan's lies with anything but the words of Holy Scripture (Matthew, 4:1-11).

Jesus does not argue or converse with the devil. He simply says, “It is written,” and proclaims the Word of God without engaging. Satan, a fallen angel, has a far superior knowledge and intellect than humans. If we enter a dialogue or intellectual argument with him, we will be deceived and lose the battle. Instead, we can ask the Holy Spirit to guide us to a passage in scripture that can counter the particular temptation we are facing. We can confidently state this verse with faith whenever we are tempted.

Entering into prayer may require many sacrifices from us but our Lord will never be outdone in generosity. If we give our time to Him, He will reward us with the gift of knowing His love for us, which is the fulfillment of all we ultimately desire.

### **Fasting**

The Gospel of Matthew states that Jesus, “fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry.” Following this, the devil tempts him to satisfy his hunger by turning a stone into bread. Jesus responds, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.’”

During Lent, we fast after the example of Jesus. Catholics are required during Lent to abstain from meat on Fridays and restrict our meals on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Personal fasting is also greatly encouraged. Many people habitually give up chocolate or dessert, but it is important to remember that fasting is not restricted to food. It is a good practice to ask the Lord in prayer what He would like us to fast from. When we listen, we may be surprised at what He suggests. Perhaps a person notices in himself a propensity to angry outbursts at co-workers or family members. Could God be asking him to fast by practicing patience and repairing relationships he has broken in his rashness? Perhaps another individual is prone to spiritual pride and wants others to know how much she is giving up for God. Jesus says those who “neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting,” have already “received their reward” (Matthew, 6:16). God may be asking this person to hide her fasting as a form of fasting.

Another way to think of fasting is by juxtaposing it with feasting. We do not fast for the sake of fasting itself but to fill the breach created with something good and holy. A prayer attributed to William Arthur Ward proposes ideas such as “fasting from gossip and feasting on affirmation... fasting from complaining and feasting on appreciation... and fasting from resentment and feasting on forgiveness.” Viewing fasting through this lens reminds us that self-denial is not the end but a means to the spiritual growth that Lent calls us to.

### **Almsgiving**

When prayer and fasting are genuinely practiced, almsgiving is sure to follow. The giving of our time, talents and treasures naturally springs forth from a sincere love of God.

But sometimes we can check off the “almsgiving box” without making a real sacrifice. We may give out of our abundance, but God often asks us to go farther - to give out of our need and to practice true gospel poverty.

In his book, Happy Are You Poor, Fr. Thomas Dubay lays out three levels of radicality concerning gospel poverty. The first is the one that most of us are called to. This includes sharing so that our abundance should supply the want of our neighbor, a truth that Fr. Dubay says, “is readily on our lips but seldom in our lives.”

The Lenten call to almsgiving is an excellent opportunity to examine our motives to see what takes first place: service to and love of God or our own need for superfluity? Do we use only what we need or has the American “good life ideology” made us forgetful of the call of the Gospel and the necessity of sharing all we have? Are we content with simplicity in our houses, furnishings, food, and clothing or are we eager for extravagance?

If we examine ourselves and find ourselves far from the Gospel ideal, let us act and make the decision to serve God, not riches (Matthew 6:24). For some of us this may mean signing up for the first time to tithe 10 percent of our income (the biblical recommendation) to our parish. For others it could mean giving away elegant clothes and jewelry to dress with more simplicity.

Genuine almsgiving should cause us to become uncomfortable. Being insecure in our own possessions effects a dependence on God. We begin to no longer rely on our means but on God’s providence to take care of us. Jesus says, “Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:33). What is God asking you, personally, to renounce and give away this Lent to practice almsgiving?

Being uncomfortable does not mean we have to be destitute. But, the call to live in destitution, poor among the poor, is given by God to some saints - not excluding some future saints, God willing, of the Diocese of [Mobile]!

How is God inviting you, personally, to deepen prayer, fasting and almsgiving this Lent?

