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Fasting, almsgiving and prayer help us grow in faith and holiness

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“. . . Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15).

These are the first words of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel. As he spoke those words in the past, he speaks them to us as we begin the season of Lent. He calls us to conversion and to faith. As we journey through life as Christians we are called to continual conversion, to grow in holiness — to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16). We are called to turn away from sin within our lives and grow in the virtues and to become more like God. We grow in faith, placing a deeper trust and confidence in God, who is the source of all holiness.

As helps and signs of our conversion the Church invites us in the Lenten Season to the practices of fasting, almsgiving and prayer. Pope Benedict XVI in his annual Lenten Message to Catholics spoke to these three practices.

Let us listen to what our Holy Father desires to teach us about these practices during this Lenten Season. “. . . Lent teaches us how to live the love of Christ in an ever more radical way. *Fasting*, which can have various motivations, takes on a profoundly religious significance for the Christian: by rendering our table poorer, we learn to overcome selfishness in order to live in the logic of gift and love; by bearing some form of deprivation — and not just what is in excess — we learn to look away from our “ego,” to discover Someone close to us and to recognize God in the face of so many brothers and sisters. For Christians, fasting, far from being depressing, opens us ever more to God and to the needs of others, thus allowing love of God to become also love of our neighbor (cf. Mark 12:31).

“In our journey, we are often faced with the temptation of accumulating and love of money that undermine God’s primacy in our lives. The greed of possession leads to violence, exploitation and death; for this, the Church, especially during the Lenten period, reminds us to practice *almsgiving* — which is the capacity to share. The idolatry of goods, on the other hand, not only causes us to drift away from others, but divests man, making him unhappy, deceiving him, deluding him without fulfilling its promises, since it puts materialistic goods in the place of God, the only source of life. How can we understand God’s paternal goodness, if our heart is full of egoism and our own projects, deceiving us that our future is guaranteed? The temptation is to think, just like the rich man in the parable: ‘My soul, you have plenty of good things laid by for many years to come. . . .’ We are all aware of the Lord’s judgment: ‘Fool! This very night the demand will be made for your soul . . .’ (Luke 12:19-20). The practice of almsgiving is a reminder of God’s primacy and turns our attention towards others, so that we may rediscover how good our Father is, and receive his mercy.

“During the entire Lenten period, the Church offers us God’s Word with particular abundance. By meditating and internalizing the Word in order to live it every day, we learn a precious and irreplaceable form of *prayer*; by attentively listening to God, who continues to speak to our hearts, we nourish the itinerary of faith initiated on the day of our Baptism. Prayer also allows us to gain a new concept of time: without the perspective of eternity and

transcendence, in fact, time simply directs our steps towards a horizon without a future. Instead, when we pray, we find time for God, to understand that his 'words will not pass away' (cf. Mark 13:31), to enter into that intimate communion with Him 'that no one shall take from you' (John 16:22), opening us to the hope that does not disappoint, eternal life."

During Lent let us make fasting, almsgiving and prayer a part of our practices to help us grow in holiness and faith. I encourage you, too, as a form of your prayer to read one of the four Gospels throughout the Lenten Season. Simply choose from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Then start at the beginning of the Gospel and read a small section at a time each day throughout Lent. Use the prayerful form of *lectio divina* to pray with the passage.

There are four easy steps in this meditative form of reading Scripture. Following is a summary of what is presented by Pope Benedict XVI in his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*:

- 1)** Quiet yourself and pray to the Holy Spirit to open your heart as you read the passage of the Gospel. Be mindful of what the text itself says allowing its true content to speak to you.
- 2)** As you listen to the text in your heart, think about what it says to you or to the community. How does the text console you, challenge you, call you to a change of heart, raise questions for you?
- 3)** Pray with the text. In your own words, express through prayer how you desire to respond to the Lord as he addresses you in the passage. Your prayer may be one of intercession, thanksgiving, praise, petition — asking for a deeper understanding, or some other grace that you desire in your heart.
- 4)** Finally, contemplate God's presence in the text and what he desires for you. Ask yourself what is the particular gift God wishes to bestow on you or in what way is he calling you to see as he sees, to order your life according to his order.

At the conclusion of the prayer lift your heart in gratitude to the Father, Jesus or the Holy Spirit for the graces you have received during the time of the prayerful reading of the Scripture passage. The Word of God through this form of prayer will truly become a living word that speaks to your heart today.

May our Lenten Season be truly grace-filled! May we come into deeper intimacy in the communion of love with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit! May it be a time of conversion and the deepening of our faith and love in the heart of the Trinity!