

Pope Francis on Prayer, Fasting & Almsgiving

“Rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joel 2:13). The prophetic call (from the prophet Joel) is a challenge for all of us, without exception, and reminds us that conversion is not a matter reducible to outward forms or vague intentions, but engages and transforms one’s entire existence from the center of the person, from the conscience. We are invited to embark on a (Lenten) journey in which, in defiance of the routine, we strive to open our eyes and ears, but especially the heart, to go beyond our “little garden.”

To open oneself to God and to others: we live in an increasingly artificial world, in a culture of “doing”, [a culture] of the “useful”, in which we exclude God from our horizon without even realizing it. Lent calls us to “give ourselves a ‘shake-up’”, to remember that we are creatures, that we are not God.

The first element is the prayer. Prayer is the strength of the Christian and of every believing person. In the weakness and fragility of our life, we can turn to God with the confidence of children and enter into communion with Him. In the face of so many wounds that hurt us and that could harden the heart, we are called to dive into the sea of prayer, which is the sea of God’s boundless love, to enjoy its tenderness. Lent is a time of prayer, a more intense, more diligent prayer, [one] more able to take care of the needs of the brethren, to intercede before God for the many situations of poverty and suffering.

The second element of the Lenten journey is fasting. We must be careful not to make a formal fasting, or one that in truth “satisfies” us because it makes us feel as though we have all in order. Fasting makes sense if it really affects our security, and also if a benefit to others comes from it, if it helps us to grow in the spirit of the Good Samaritan, who bends down to his brother in need and takes care of him. Fasting involves choosing a sober life, which does not waste, which does not “discard”. Fasting helps us to train the heart to essentiality and sharing. It is a sign of awareness and responsibility in the face of injustices, abuses, especially towards the poor and the little ones, and is a sign of our trust in God and His providence.

The third element is almsgiving: it is a sign of gratuity because alms are given to someone from whom you would not expect to receive anything in return. Gratuity should be one of the characteristics of a Christian, who, aware of having received everything from God freely, that is without any merit, learns to give to others freely. Today often gratuity is not part of everyday life, where everything is bought and sold. Everything is calculation and measurement. Almsgiving helps us to live the gratuitousness of the gift, which is freedom from the obsession with possessing things, [freedom from] the fear of losing what one has, from the sadness of those who do not want to share their well-being with others.

With its calls to conversion, Lent comes providentially to rouse us, to shake us from our torpor, from the risk of moving forward [merely] by inertia. The exhortation that the Lord speaks to us through the prophet Joel is loud and clear: “Return to me with all your heart” (Joel 2:12). Why must we return to God? Because something is wrong in us, in society, in the Church - and we need to change, to turn things around, to repent! Once again Lent comes to make its prophetic appeal, to remind us that it is possible to realize something new within ourselves and around us, simply because God is faithful, continues to be full of goodness and mercy, and is always ready to forgive and start over from scratch.

