

Brothers and Sisters,

The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 14. The word "Lent" comes from the Old English "lencten," meaning "springtime" or "when days are lengthened." As Lent coincides with the season of spring, the association is obvious. The ashes used in the liturgies on Ash Wednesday come from the burned, blessed palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday. Traditionally, Lent is comprised of 40 days. This period is based on Christ's fasting for 40 days in the desert. The number 40 is mentioned dozens of times in the Sacred Scriptures, and symbolizes a time of testing, trial or preparation.

As we approach this holy time in the liturgical calendar, we should be intentional about focusing upon the three traditional pillars of Lenten discipline: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. During this season of penance and baptismal renewal in preparation for Easter, we make time for additional opportunities to pray - for the good of our souls; to fast - for the good of our bodies; and to give alms - for the good of our neighbors in need. More attention to prayer helps draw us closer to God. Fasting helps us to achieve self-mastery and draws our attention to the Lord, who alone is the true fulfillment of all our desires. Giving alms helps us to have compassion for the plight of the needy, and to understand that when we serve "one of the least of these, His brethren," we are serving the Lord Himself who comes to us in the distressing disguise of the poor.

One way of hallowing Lent is to participate more fully in opportunities for prayer, liturgical and otherwise. One of the popular prayer observances during Lent consists of praying the Stations of the Cross, done here at OLR on Wednesday evenings in Lent at 5:30 p.m., and on Fridays at 2:30 p.m. This devotion originated with the Franciscans who erected outdoor stations corresponding to the places in the Holy Land associated with our Lord's passion. Pilgrims who could not go to the Holy Land to prayerfully walk the Via Dolorosa, the route that Jesus walked on the way to his crucifixion, could thus take part vicariously in our Lord's sorrowful journey.

The rules for fasting and abstinence from meat during Lent are as follows (from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops): "Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are obligatory days of universal fast and abstinence. Fasting is obligatory for all who have completed their 18th year and have not yet reached their 60th year. Fasting allows a person to eat one full meal. Two smaller meals may be taken, not to equal one full meal. Fridays in Lent are obligatory days of complete abstinence from meat for all who have completed their 14th year." If possible, the fast on Good Friday is continued until the Easter Vigil (on Holy Saturday night) as the "paschal fast" to honor the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus, and to prepare ourselves to share more fully and to celebrate more readily his Resurrection."

Almsgiving, or charity, allows us to minister directly to those in need. Good opportunities for almsgiving this year would include a gift to the Catholic Appeal of South Carolina (formerly known as the Bishop's Annual Appeal), to the work of our St. Vincent de Paul Society (SVDP), or to Mother Teresa House.

Lent is also a particularly appropriate time to make a good examination of conscience and go to the Sacrament of Confession. Confessions, including additional Lenten opportunities, will be heard Wednesdays at 4:30 p.m.; after the 10:00 a.m. Mass on Thursdays; Saturdays at 3:30 p.m.; Sundays at 9:00 a.m.; and again Sundays at 3:30 p.m. Be sure to make your Lenten confession so that you are able to celebrate Easter fully reconciled to the Lord and his Church.

Let's all resolve to make this a holy and fruitful Lent, so that we can celebrate Easter with authentic joy!

Fr. Richard Ballard
Parochial Vicar