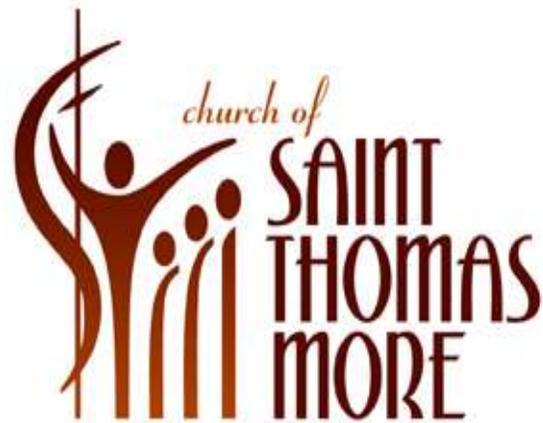


Lent – Prayer, Fasting & Almsgiving

When you say “Lent” – many people immediately think of ashes on their foreheads, not eating meat on Fridays, or practices like the stations of the cross. These are all good things, but they are not what the Church asks us to focus on. The three traditions of our Lenten observance are prayer, fasting and almsgiving.



Prayer: Time given to prayer during Lent should draw us closer to the Lord. We might pray especially for the grace to live out our baptismal promises more fully. We might pray for the Elect who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil. We might pray that the St. Thomas More community will be truly renewed in their baptismal commitment at Easter.

In addition to your individual prayer, there are many communal prayer opportunities at St. Thomas More every year, including a weekly Vespers service. Those who have attended these services have found them deeply reflective, with a focus on the psalms and breaking open the Word of God. As one of our Lectors reflected one evening, the Voice of God spoke at Jesus’ transfiguration and said “Listen to him.” She urged us simply to “listen”. That’s the essence of prayer.

Fasting: Fasting is one of the most ancient practices linked to Lent. Simply put, fasting is the opposite of feasting. It means going without food and/or drink. Not just cutting down, but going without. Some may remember the old rule of fasting before receiving Communion: from midnight on, no food or drink (not even water). This practice began in the fourth century, and continued until 1957.

The early Church fasted intensely for two days before the celebration of the Easter Vigil. This fast was later extended and became a 40-day period of fasting leading up to Easter. Vatican II called us to renew the observance of the ancient paschal fast:

"Let the paschal fast be kept sacred. Let it be celebrated everywhere on Good Friday and, where possible, prolonged throughout Holy Saturday, so that the joys of the Sunday of the resurrection may be attained with uplifted and clear mind." (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy # 110).

Fasting is an aid to prayer, as the pangs of hunger remind us of our hunger for God. The prophet Isaiah insists that fasting without changing our behavior is not pleasing to God:

"This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own" (Is 58:6-7).

Besides helping us to not take food for granted, fasting can be healthy (for those who are able) because it cleans out our body. More than that, it activates our mind and spirit, directing energy that would have been spent on digestion. Usually our bodies spend more energy on digesting

than on anything else. If we significantly reduce our food consumption, or as some do, have only water for 24 hours, we have a great store of energy not usually available, which can drive us to thoughts much deeper than usual.

Fasting should be linked to our concern for those who are forced to fast by poverty, those who suffer from the injustices of our economic and political structures. Abstaining from meat traditionally linked us to the poor, who could seldom afford meat for their meals. It can do the same today only if we remember the purpose of abstinence and embrace it as a spiritual link to those whose meals are sparse and simple. Avoiding meat while eating lobster misses the whole point!

By experiencing hunger in our fasting, we become more closely in touch with those who have little to eat, the poor, and that leads to the final Lenten practice: almsgiving.

Almsgiving: It should be obvious at this point that almsgiving, linked to our baptismal commitment, is a sign of our care for those in need and an expression of our gratitude for all that God has given to us. Works of charity and justice are integral elements of the Christian way of life we began when we were baptized.

St. Augustine wrapped it all up: “Let us by our prayers, add the wings of piety to our alms deeds and fasting, so that they may fly more readily to God.”

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