

Pope Benedict stunned the world by announcing his resignation, effective in Rome at 8:00PM February 28. I feel mixed emotions - sadness that physical weakness makes him unable to continue in this office. At the same time, I am awed by a man who could step aside from probably the most prestigious position on the planet because he feels he can no longer do the job the way it needs to be done. As we begin Lent I ask you to pray for Pope Benedict in the final weeks of his papacy - and for the cardinals who will meet in March to elect a new pope.

Along with sadness and appreciation, the pope's announcement has also brought some humor. One jokester quipped: The pope has set the bar really high when it comes to giving up something Lent! Whatever you and I give up, it can't possibly come close to giving up the papacy!

Humor aside, that does raise the question: how *will* you and I observe Lent 2013? It seems appropriate to turn to Pope Benedict himself. In a Lenten message Pope Benedict gave some concrete suggestions. He recalls the three basic Lenten "tasks" - prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Sometimes people think that these concrete practices are out-of-date, that Jesus has somehow spiritualized everything. You know, it's the 21st century - we don't have to get on our knees, or reach into our wallets or pass up a tempting dessert. People who have fallen into that vague temptation of "spirituality," need to re-read today's Gospel. Jesus does not say, "If you fast." He says, "When you fast." He does not say, "If you feel like praying." He says, "When you pray." Nor does he say, "Give if you happen to have something extra." No, he says, "When you give alms."

Year after year we have heard preachers talk about these three tasks: prayer, fasting and giving. Is that really the answer to facing the great temptations of life? Throughout lent we talk about the need to change our hearts and lives. Surely this can't be brought about by merely rattling off a Hail Mary, giving up cookies or putting a few coins in a rice bowl.

Yet if we are really serious about Lent and are prepared to undertake the task of re-conversion to Christ, of becoming more and more conformed to his image, then we will also take seriously the means the Church gives us. But to really appreciate and understand them we need to get below the surface and find out what they really mean.

First let's agree that in lent we are basically talking about the status of our relationship with God. So if what we are dealing with is a relationship we need to look at prayer, fasting and almsgiving as aspects of our relationship with God.

Under the heading of prayer we are really talking about my **personal attitude** to God. What are the channels of communication between us like? Are they open? If they are open, just what state are they in? Is it just a one-way link, me telling God what he should do, or is it like a 'hot-line' only used for emergencies? Or maybe I'm talking so much I never sit back quietly and give God a change to speak?

The point I want to make is that prayer is the **actual content of your relationship** with God. And what the church is saying is: get those channels of communication open and in frequent use. And if you don't seem to be getting much response don't worry because in a way this too is a response, hang in there and wait for God; make your prayer about listening and not just telling.

So prayer is about our direct relationship with God and not merely about the saying of prayers. During Lent then we don't just try to say more prayers, but we think about the whole pattern of prayer in our life. And we ask what does it mean? Where is it going? Have we developed or are we still at the primary school stage? Is our prayer just an example of obsessive activity? Or is it a major stimulus forcing us to grow as persons, forcing us to be more fully human and therefore closer to God?

As regards fasting, I see this as shifting the focus to how I see myself as a human being situated in the material world. It is about my priorities and the value I place on material things, how I occupy myself and how I measure my worth.

For example, how can I be a God-centered person and yet judge my success in life by the standards of the consumer society?

Under the deceptively simple heading of fasting the Church is trying to indicate a whole attitude towards life, an attitude towards self and material things. The church says that **the values and attitudes of someone who sees the need for fasting and actually does fast are worth acquiring and they ultimately lead one to God.** Yes, the material world and material pleasures are good and wonderful in themselves, but they are created things and in ultimate terms the creator is much more important than what he creates. To be focused on material things and to see no need for sacrifice is to devalue ourselves. We who are made in the image of God cannot ultimately be satisfied with anything less than God himself.

Lent is for reviewing, so let's review our lives and ask the question, how does a redeemed child of God actually live in the world of material things? The answer will be a little different for everyone but maybe we need to restore a little balance in our lives and fasting can help us shift our focus.

Finally we need to broaden out the idea of almsgiving a bit and not restrict it to charitable handouts. Just as prayer speaks of our relationship with God and fasting our relationship with the world, so Almsgiving is about our relationship to other people. The key part of the word "almsgiving" is giving -- Becoming a 'giving' person.

I think it is all summed up in the use and misuse of the word 'charity'. Charity means 'love', but society has misused it and it now means money doled out by those trying to salve their consciences. No wonder people say they don't want charity! In our Lenten review of life we ask ourselves whether love is, in fact, what characterizes our relationships? Are we **turned in** on ourselves or **turned out** toward others seeing in them other Christs, each in the process of dying on their own cross?

If that's how we did see others then we certainly would be moved. Which one of us doesn't have the cross in life, which one of us doesn't expect other people to make allowances for us? If this is so, then could we be so hard hearted? Almsgiving isn't handing out money to the vagrant. Almsgiving is giving our whole lives to others in the name of the man who died to redeem the whole world. And yes, it will involve reaching into our wallets now and again, but it will never be out of disgust or embarrassment. We will want to maintain other peoples self-respect and be willing to put up with other people's idiosyncrasies in the knowledge that its surely just as hard for them to put up with us.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving – they are both code words and symbols of a much deeper re-examination of our lives. That sort of examination can be difficult and more than a little scary – take it slow, we have 40 days to work on it and use these very concrete practices to guide that journey.