

## **Pastoral Letter**

*Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2025*

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

We begin this Lenten Season on Ash Wednesday in the spirit of the Jubilee Year – at a time of grace and conversion. Today’s Gospel provides us with a roadmap for the forty days of preparation leading to Easter, which all Christians will celebrate on the same day this year – a sign of unity and communion.

First, Jesus warns us against hypocrisy. He criticizes those who perform good deeds only to be seen by others. The Lord reminds us that God sees our innermost intentions and evaluates the purpose of our actions. Here Jesus teaches us a fundamental principle: our deeds must come from a sincere and upright heart. At its core, fasting helps us purify our intentions in what we say, do, and think, allowing us to do everything for the glory of God.

Jesus presents to us three essential pillars of the spiritual life: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. These three practices are like the legs of a table that support our sanctification. If one is missing, the entire structure collapses. And if the legs are uneven, the table becomes unstable. Therefore, it is crucial that these three dimensions grow in balance.

Giving alms expresses our love for God and our neighbor. Generosity helps us overcome selfishness and open our hearts to others. We cannot eliminate all poverty in the world, but we can ease the suffering around us. How often do we support our community? Do we remember the poor, not only through material donations but also with our time, by listening and being present? There is material poverty, but also loneliness, which can hurt more than hunger. Alms given with love teach us to grow in the virtue of charity, the greatest of all virtues. That is why Jesus mentions it first. Let us ask Jesus to help us grow in love for God and our neighbor through concrete acts.

The second pillar is prayer. Here, Jesus exposes hypocrisy – the attitude of pretending to be something one is not. A true Christian rejects deceit and falsehood. Our words and actions must reflect the face of Jesus – the face of mercy. Without prayer, we can do nothing, just as we cannot live without air. But when we pray, our whole being – body and soul – breathes and lives. Prayer means talking with God, opening our hearts to Him, and sharing our joys, worries, and struggles. It is about giving thanks, asking for forgiveness, and showing love.

But above all, prayer consists of listening to God – pausing to hear what He wants to say to us. For this, we need time and a suitable place. Prayer reveals faith to us. Our faith grows in rhythm with our prayer, and our prayer reflects our faith. Let us ask the Lord for a deeper faith so that we may pray more and trust more in His divine providence.

The third pillar is fasting – prayer lived out physically. Fasting is not just about abstaining from food but about giving up small things to strengthen our will and make more room for God in our hearts. It helps us control our desires, be freer, and live more simply. Fasting

can mean refraining from food, avoiding distractions such as the internet or social media, or making small sacrifices in daily life.

This type of fasting, which affects our senses and habits, strengthens our inner self-discipline: our intellect becomes clearer, our will is fortified, and our hearts love more deeply. Such a spiritual exercise helps us advance in faith and opens our hearts to the hope of heaven, where only God can fully satisfy our longing. Fasting speaks to us about hope. When we give up something we consider necessary, we place our lives in the hands of the Lord. Fasting increases our hope in God, our Creator and sustainer of our lives. Let us ask Jesus to strengthen our hope so that we may think more about heaven.

During Jesus' temptations in the desert, the devil offered Him three sins: gluttony, greed, and the desire for power. Jesus responded with fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. These practices are antidotes to our selfishness and help us live for the glory of God. That is why we should not perform good deeds for the approval of others. The right intention is essential in order to receive grace. We must ask ourselves: why do I do what I do? Is it for my benefit or for the glory of God? Through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, we learn to renounce self-centeredness and draw closer to God, deepening our relationship with Him. In this way, we can live a truly spiritual life, dedicated to honoring God and loving our neighbor.

Lent is an opportunity to grow in faith, hope, and charity – the three greatest gifts that God gives us. By practicing fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, we can strengthen these virtues and allow Christ to live in us.

Let us ask our Mother, the Virgin Mary, and our Father, St. Joseph, that we, like them, may make room for Jesus in our lives and hearts. Let us ask God for trust and strength, so that we may die to ourselves, allowing God to live in us, and that we may bring Him to the whole world.

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