

- **Prayer**—In prayer, we encounter and walk with God. During the Lenten season, we are encouraged to make opportunities for individual and common prayer. Opportunities for prayer can include attending Mass, praying the liturgy of the hours, praying within the family, visiting a chapel, prayerfully reading the Bible, reciting the rosary, meditating the Stations of the Cross, or praying before the Blessed Sacrament.
- **Fasting**—By refraining from eating, we signify our oneness with the Lord, acknowledge our need for conversion, and give witness to our solidarity with those less fortunate.
- **Almsgiving**—This penitential practice entails giving money or other resources for the benefit of those in need. One possible source of this money is that which has been saved from fasting or other means of self-denial.
- **Abstinence** —In the United States, this penitential practice consists of refraining from the consumption of meat.
- **The Practice of Charity** "Which Covers a Multitude of Sins" (1 Pt 4:8)—Motivated by love for God and for one's neighbor, we express solicitude through various works for those who are in need, especially the poor, the sick, the underprivileged, the aged, the lonely, the imprisoned, the discouraged, the bedridden, and the overburdened.
- **Works of Mercy**—Through charitable actions we express compassionate care for others by easing their burdens and attending to their bodily and spiritual needs.
- **Mortification**—In general terms, mortification refers to the radical self-denial and wholehearted giving of oneself to God that Jesus called for when he told his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt 16:24). More specifically, mortification is a form of ascetic discipline that involves denial of some kind of enjoyment in order to gain a greater detachment from one's desires. The goal of mortification is fullness of life, not death—freedom, not enslavement.
- **Sacrifices**—Joining ourselves to Christ's sacrifice, we

freely give up time, energy, leisure, and other goods for the sake of others.

- **Examination of Conscience**—Through this prayerful and reflective process, we review the state of our spiritual health and identify those areas of our lives and of our relationships where we are not acting in a truly Christian manner and where reform is needed. Christians are encouraged to make a brief examination of conscience before retiring for the night.
- **Spiritual Direction**—Under the guidance of a spiritual director, a person is led to a deeper understanding of his or her relationship with God. Personal weaknesses and strengths are identified in view of their effect on spiritual growth.
- **Stations of the Cross**—This popular devotional practice was developed in order to permit those who could not make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to follow in the steps of Jesus along his journey from judgment to burial. Catholics throughout the centuries have paused to pray the stations of the cross, especially during the Lenten season.

Sample Expressions of Penance:

- Efforts at reconciliation with a family member or neighbor
- Tears of repentance
- Concern for the salvation of our sisters and brothers
- Prayer to the saints for their intercession
- Patient acceptance of the cross we must bear to be faithful to Christ
- Defense of justice and right
- Admission of faults to God and to one another
- Mutual correction
- Offer and acceptance of forgiveness
- Endurance of persecution for the sake of God's kingdom
- Development of a spirit of penance
- Witness to a Christian way of life

“The justice of God has been manifested through faith in Jesus Christ” (Rm 3, 21-22)

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

Each year, on the occasion of Lent, the Church invites us to a sincere review of our life in light of the teachings of the Gospel. This year, I would like to offer you some reflections on the great theme of justice, beginning from the Pauline affirmation: “The justice of God has been manifested through faith in Jesus Christ” (cf. Rm 3, 21-22).

Justice: “dare cuique suum”

First of all, I want to consider the meaning of the term “justice,” which in common usage implies “to render to every man his due,” according to the famous expression of Ulpian, a Roman jurist of the third century. In reality, however, this classical definition does not specify what “due” is to be rendered to each person. What man needs most cannot be guaranteed to him by law. In order to live life to the full, something more intimate is necessary that can be granted only as a gift: we could say that man lives by that love which only God can communicate since He created the human person in His image and likeness. Material goods are certainly useful and required – indeed Jesus Himself was concerned to heal the sick, feed the crowds that followed Him and surely condemns the indifference that even today forces hundreds of millions into death through lack of food, water and medicine – yet “distributive” justice does not render to the human being the totality of his “due.” Just as man needs bread, so does man have even more need of God. Saint Augustine notes: if “justice is that virtue which gives every one his due ... where, then, is the justice of man, when he deserts the true God?” (De civitate Dei, XIX, 21).

What is the Cause of Injustice?

The Evangelist Mark reports the following words of Jesus, which are inserted within the debate at that time regarding what is pure and impure: “There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him ... What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts” (Mk 7, 14-15, 20-21). Beyond the immediate question concerning food, we can detect in

the reaction of the Pharisees a permanent temptation within man: to situate the origin of evil in an exterior cause. Many modern ideologies deep down have this presupposition: since injustice comes “from outside,” in order for justice to reign, it is sufficient to remove the exterior causes that prevent it being achieved. This way of thinking – Jesus warns – is ingenuous and shortsighted. Injustice, the fruit of evil, does not have exclusively external roots; its origin lies in the human heart, where the seeds are found of a mysterious cooperation with evil. With bitterness the Psalmist recognises this: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps 51,7). Indeed, man is weakened by an intense influence, which wounds his capacity to enter into communion with the other. By nature, he is open to sharing freely, but he finds in his being a strange force of gravity that makes him turn in and affirm himself above and against others: this is egoism, the result of original sin. Adam and Eve, seduced by Satan’s lie, snatching the mysterious fruit against the divine command, replaced the logic of trusting in Love with that of suspicion and competition; the logic of receiving and trustfully expecting from the Other with anxiously seizing and doing on one’s own (cf. Gn 3, 1-6), experiencing, as a consequence, a sense of disquiet and uncertainty. How can man free himself from this selfish influence and open himself to love?

Justice and Sedaqah

At the heart of the wisdom of Israel, we find a profound link between faith in God who “lifts the needy from the ash heap” (Ps 113,7) and justice towards one’s neighbor. The Hebrew word itself that indicates the virtue of justice, *sedaqah*, expresses this well. *Sedaqah*, in fact, signifies on the one hand full acceptance of the will of the God of Israel; on the other hand, equity in relation to one’s neighbour (cf. Ex 20, 12-17), especially the poor, the stranger, the orphan and the widow (cf. Dt 10, 18-19). But the two meanings are linked because giving to the poor for the Israelite is none other than restoring what is owed to God, who had pity on the misery of His people. It was not by chance that the gift to Moses of the tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai took place after the crossing of

the Red Sea. Listening to the Law presupposes faith in God who first “heard the cry” of His people and “came down to deliver them out of hand of the Egyptians” (cf. Ex 3,8). God is attentive to the cry of the poor and in return asks to be listened to: He asks for justice towards the poor (cf. Sir 4,4-5, 8-9), the stranger (cf. Ex 22,20), the slave (cf. Dt 15, 12-18). In order to enter into justice, it is thus necessary to leave that illusion of self-sufficiency, the profound state of closure, which is the very origin of injustice. In other words, what is needed is an even deeper “exodus” than that accomplished by God with Moses, a liberation of the heart, which the Law on its own is powerless to realize. Does man have any hope of justice then?

Christ, the Justice of God

The Christian Good News responds positively to man’s thirst for justice, as Saint Paul affirms in the Letter to the Romans: “But now the justice of God has been manifested apart from law ... the justice of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (3, 21-25). What then is the justice of Christ? Above all, it is the justice that comes from grace, where it is not man who makes amends, heals himself and others. The fact that “expiation” flows from the “blood” of Christ signifies that it is not man’s sacrifices that free him from the weight of his faults, but the loving act of God who opens Himself in the extreme, even to the point of bearing in Himself the “curse” due to man so as to give in return the “blessing” due to God (cf. Gal 3, 13-14). But this raises an immediate objection: what kind of justice is this where the just man dies for the guilty and the guilty receives in return the blessing due to the just one? Would this not mean that each one receives the contrary of his “due”? In reality, here we discover divine justice, which is so profoundly different from its human counterpart. God has paid for us the price of the exchange in His Son, a price that is truly exorbitant. Before the justice of the Cross, man may rebel for this reveals how man is not a self-sufficient being, but in need of Another in order to realize himself fully. Conversion to Christ, believing in the Gospel, ultimately means this: to exit the illusion of self-sufficiency in order to discover and accept one’s own need – the need of others and

God, the need of His forgiveness and His friendship. So we understand how faith is altogether different from a natural, good-feeling, obvious fact: humility is required to accept that I need Another to free me from “what is mine,” to give me gratuitously “what is His.” This happens especially in the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Thanks to Christ’s action, we may enter into the “greatest” justice, which is that of love (cf. Rm 13, 8-10), the justice that recognises itself in every case more a debtor than a creditor, because it has received more than could ever have been expected. Strengthened by this very experience, the Christian is moved to contribute to creating just societies, where all receive what is necessary to live according to the dignity proper to the human person and where justice is enlivened by love.

Dear brothers and sisters, Lent culminates in the Paschal Triduum, in which this year, too, we shall celebrate divine justice – the fullness of charity, gift, salvation. May this penitential season be for every Christian a time of authentic conversion and intense knowledge of the mystery of Christ, who came to fulfill every justice. With these sentiments, I cordially impart to all of you my Apostolic Blessing.

"Dear brothers and sisters, it is good to see how the ultimate goal of fasting is to help each one of us, as Servant of God Pope John Paul II wrote, to make the complete gift of self to God. May every family and Christian community use well this time of Lent, therefore, in order to cast aside all that distracts the spirit and grow in whatever nourishes the soul, moving it to love of God and neighbour. I am thinking especially of a greater commitment to prayer, 'lectio divina', recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and active participation in the Eucharist, especially the Holy Sunday Mass. With this interior disposition, let us enter the penitential spirit of Lent. May the Blessed Virgin Mary, '*Causa nostrae laetitiae*', accompany and support us in the effort to free our heart from slavery to sin, making it evermore a 'living tabernacle of God.'

With these wishes, while assuring every believer and ecclesial community of my prayer for a fruitful Lenten journey, I cordially impart to all of you my Apostolic Blessing".

Pope Benedict XVI

Rules for Fasting and Abstinence

The rules are independent of the rite of the Mass (extraordinary or ordinary form) one attends. They are given by the official law of the church which is to be found, for Latin Rite Catholics, in the Code of Canon Law (There is a different Code of canon Law for Eastern Rite Catholics). The last edition of the Latin Code of Canon Law was promulgated in 1983. The rules contained in canons 1249-1253 repeat substantially what Pope Paul VI had decreed in the Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini* (1966). Both documents may be read or downloaded from www.vatican.va. The following is a summary of the current rules.

1. By divine law all the faithful are required to do penance.
2. Lent is the main time of the year one does penance. There are 3 main ways: fasting, prayer, almsgiving.
3. There is a strict obligation to fast and abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.
4. There is a strict obligation to abstain from meat on other Fridays of Lent (6 Fridays). Strict obligation means that to disregard completely the law of fast and abstinence is seriously sinful.
5. Non-Lenten Fridays of the year are also penitential days: the usual way of making penance on those Fridays is abstinence. If one does not abstain from meat on those Fridays, one has to make another form of penance or say some special prayers (e.g.: rosary, stations of the cross...).
6. The law of abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, the products of milk or condiments made of animal fat.
7. The law of fasting allows only one full meal a day and two collations (snacks). The combination of the two collations should not equal a full meal.
8. To the law of abstinence are bound those who have completed their 14th year of age (14 and up). To the law

of fast are bound those who have completed their 18th year and up to the beginning of their 60th year (18-59). As regards those of a lesser age, pastors and parents should see to it with particular care that they are educated to a true sense of penitence.

9. Before the change of law in 1966, every weekday of Lent was a fasting day. Although there is no strict obligation to fast any longer --except on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday-- it is keeping with the spirit of Lent to fast every weekday of Lent. A traditional practice is to eat meat at one meal only on weekdays of Lent excepted on Fridays when there is full abstinence.
10. Each and every day of lent is still a penitential day, so there is an obligation to practice some form of penance. The virtue of penitence is first exercised in persevering faithfulness to the duties of one’s state in life, in the acceptance of the difficulties arising from one’s work and relations with others in a patient bearing of trials. Because fasting is not mandatory on most days of Lent, the Church invites us to respond to the divine law of penitence by some voluntary act, apart from the renunciation imposed by the burdens of everyday life.
11. The penitence or mortification we choose should be realistic and useful to our Christian Life. Please find below a list of suggestions. Lent is a penitential time for Children as well. The church understands that fasting is not appropriate to them. However, they are many other ways to make penance. A few example: going to daily Mass whenever possible; participating to other services such as the stations of the cross; abstaining from watching TV, a more healthy diet, no eating between meals, no sodas, no sweets, etc...
12. One is excused of the laws of fasting and abstinence on Solemnities (First Class feasts). This year, the solemnity of St. Joseph falls on Friday, March 19th and so on that Friday one is excused of abstinence. Volunteering for our St. Patrick’s Dinner on Wednesday, March 17th may be considered as a penance so one would not have to do another penance on that day...