The Best Thing that Can Happen to Us

Beneath the good deeds may lay hidden the selfish motivation to be praised and glorified by others. Religious practices become a way to gain the attention of others. The scribes and the Pharisees attracted not only praises, but also the first place in banquets and to be served the best food and drink. Jesus criticized them for using fasting, almsgiving and prayer to attract attention to themselves. Jesus asked his followers to be aware of the hidden God who watches over us. When we do our good deeds in silence without attracting any media attention, we are in the right track.

Jesus told his critics that his followers did not fast because they still had him around. The three years of missionary life in Israel demanded constant movement by foot. They could not fast because they were always hungry as they walked from one town to another. One time, they ate raw grain. Their celebration was not in eating nor drinking, but in Jesus’ constant effort to be with others, reaching people of the periphery. They arrived at times in towns thirsty as in the case of the Samaritan woman who offered him a drink (Jn 4:7). The only time they were pictured in a feast was during the wedding at Cana, at the house of Lazarus and Matthew, and the last supper. The rest of the time they were on the move, praying in the mountains, sleeping under the trees and partaking of anything that people offered them. Their celebration was their mission as it was always accompanied by fasting, almsgiving and prayer.

When charitable activities are publicized, the aim should be to inspire more acts of charity and generous people to join in the crusade. It is also part of good news to see people serving their fellow human beings, especially the poor. The social media, especially Facebook, can transform a simple act of charity into a viral phenomenon attracting attention and help also from others. But when such acts are featured with the faces of the persons in charge of this dominating the scene, it becomes a self-serving activity, not different from the shows of politicians.

Doing everything in secret so that the Father in secret may reward you is a command of Jesus. It makes us aware that the only thing that matters in the end is the reward we may receive from him. The applause and the recognition of peoples are passing. The glory that people share is nothing. Only the glory of God matters because it remains for all eternity.

The Lenten season is really a time to dwell in God’s glory. His reward is his embrace, asking us to journey with him to the cross where the Son died alone, known only to his Father. Real glory lies in the cross. That’s why we have to hang there all our hunger for recognition and fame, content of being with Jesus who was abandoned even by his best friend in his moment of suffering. To be alone with God is to be secured and embraced, the best thing that can ever happen to anyone of us.

— Tim S. Melliza, SSP

Please read the reflection before or after the Mass so that you can actively participate in the celebration.
is gracious and merciful. He forgives us our transgressions and gives us healing.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Joel

EVEN NOW, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps he will again relent and leave behind him a blessing, offerings and libations for the LORD, your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion! Proclaim a fast, call an assembly; gather the people, notify the congregation; assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast; let the bridegroom quit his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep, and say, “Spare, O LORD, your people, and make not your heritage a reproach, with the nations ruling over them! Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land and took pity on his people.

— The word of the Lord.
All — Thanks be to God.

Responsorial Psalm (Ps 51)

R — Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Verse before the Gospel

R — If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Gospel (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18)

P — A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew
All — Glory to you, O Lord.

JESUS said to his disciples: “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have
no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

“When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.”

— The Gospel of the Lord.
All — Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Homily (Sit)

Blessing of Ashes (Stand)

P — Dear brethren (brothers and sisters), let us humbly ask God our Father that he be pleased to bless with the abundance of his grace these ashes, which we will put on our heads in penitence. O God, who are moved by acts of humility and respond with forgiveness to works of penance, lend your merciful ear to our prayers and in your kindness pour out the grace of your (†) blessing on your servants who are marked with these ashes, that, as they follow the Lenten observances, they may be worthy to come with minds made pure to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of your Son. Through Christ our Lord.

All — Amen.

(He sprinkles the ashes with holy water in silence.)

Giving of Ashes

(The priest places the ashes on the forehead of those who come forward, saying to each: Repent, and believe in the Gospel. Or: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Meanwhile, appropriate songs are sung.)

Prayer of the Faithful

P — Let us pray to our heavenly Father that as we start our Lenten journey, we may open our hearts to his kingdom, stay close with him in prayer, and be active in works of charity. With humility and trust, we pray:

R — Merciful Lord, hear our prayer.
C — That we may welcome Lent as an acceptable time of salvation through our works of fasting, prayer, and sharing, we pray: (R)
C — That the Word of God may inspire us to have a change of heart and mind, to turn away from sin, and to choose to do good, we pray: (R)
C — That the mark of ashes on our forehead may remind us of our human frailty and inspire us to spend the gift of our life for the building of God’s kingdom, we pray: (R)
C — That our departed brothers and sisters may experience the joy and the peace of God’s eternal kingdom, we pray: (R)
C — Let us pray for the urgent concerns of our community and our personal intentions (pause). We pray: (R)
C — Almighty Father, hear our petitions. May this season of repentance bring us your forgiveness and lead us to the joy of Christ’s victory over sin and death. Through Christ our Lord.
All — Amen.

THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Presentation of the Gifts (Stand)

P — Pray, brethren...

All — May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good, and the good of all his holy Church.

Prayer over the Offerings

P — As we solemnly offer the annual sacrifice for the beginning of Lent, we entreat you, O Lord, that, through works of penance and charity, we may turn away from harmful pleasures and, cleansed from our sins, may become worthy to celebrate devoutly the Passion of your Son.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
All — Amen.

Preface IV of Lent

P — The Lord be with you.
All — And with your spirit.
P — Lift up your hearts.
All — We lift them up to the Lord.
P — Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
All — It is right and just.
P — It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God.
For through bodily fasting you restrain our faults, raise up our minds, and bestow both virtue and its rewards, through Christ our Lord.
Through him the Angels praise your majesty, Dominions adore and Powers tremble before you. Heaven and the Virtues of heaven and the blessed Seraphim worship together with exultation. May our voices, we pray, join with theirs in humble praise, as we acclaim:
All — Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest. (Kneel)

Acclamation (Stand)

All — When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your Death, O Lord, until you come again.
The Lord’s Prayer

All — Our Father...
P — Deliver us, Lord...
All — For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever.

Invitation to Peace

Invitation to Communion (Kneel)
P — Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those who are called to the supper of the Lamb.
All — Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.

Communion Antiphon
[cf. Ps 1:2-3]
He who ponders the law of the Lord day and night will yield fruit in due season.

Prayer after Communion (Stand)
P — Let us pray. (Pause)
May the Sacrament we have received sustain us, O Lord, that our Lenten fast may be pleasing to you and be for us a healing remedy.
Through Christ our Lord.
All — Amen.

The Concluding Rites

P — The Lord be with you.
All — And with your spirit.

Prayer over the People
P — Bow down for the blessing. (Pause)
Pour out a spirit of compunction, O God, on those who bow before your majesty, and by your mercy may they merit the rewards you promise to those who do penance.
Through Christ our Lord.
All — Amen.

P — And may the blessing of almighty God, the Father, and the Son, (†) and the Holy Spirit come down on you and remain with you for ever.
All — Amen.

Dismissal
P — Go in peace.
All — Thanks be to God.

Excerpt from the Ash Wednesday Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis

6 March 2019, at the Basilica of Santa Sabina, Rome

Today we have been offered a sign that will help us find our direction: the head marked by ash. It is a sign that causes us to consider what occupies our mind. Our thoughts often focus on transient things, which come and go. The small mark of ash, which we will receive, is a subtle yet real reminder that of the many things occupying our thoughts, that we chase after and worry about every day, nothing will remain. No matter how hard we work, we will take no wealth with us from this life. Earthly realities fade away like dust in the wind. Possessions are temporary, power passes, success wanes. The culture of appearance prevalent today, which persuades us to live for passing things, is a great deception. It is like a blaze: once ended, only ash remains. Lent is the time to flee ourselves from the illusion of chasing after dust. Lent is for rediscovering that we are created for the inextinguishable flame, not for ashes that immediately disappear; for God, not for the world; for the eternity of heaven, not for earthly deceit; for the freedom of the children of God, not for slavery to things. We should ask ourselves today: Where do I stand? Do I live for fire or for ash?

On this Lenten journey, back to what is essential, the Gospel proposes three steps which the Lord invites us to undertake without hypocrisy and pretence: almsgiving, prayer, fasting. What are they for? Almsgiving, prayer and fasting bring us back to the three realities that do not fade away. Prayer unites us to God; charity, to our neighbour; fasting, to ourselves. God, my neighbour, my life: these are the realities that do not fade away and in which we must invest. Lent, therefore, invites us to focus, first of all on the Almighty, in prayer, which frees us from that horizontal and mundane life where we find time for self but forget God. It then invites us to focus on others, with the charity that frees us from the vanity of acquiring and of thinking that things are only good if they are good for me. Finally, Lent invites us to look inside our heart, with fasting, which frees us from attachment to things and from the worldliness that numbs the heart. Prayer, charity, fasting: three investments for a treasure that endures.

Jesus said: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6:21). Our heart always points in some direction: it is like a compass seeking its bearings. We can also compare it to a magnet: it needs to attach itself to something. But if it only attaches itself to earthly things, sooner or later it becomes a slave to them: things to be used become things we serve. Outward appearance, money, a career or hobby: if we live for them, they will become idols that enslave us, sires that charm us and then cast us adrift. Whereas if our heart is attached to what does not pass away, we rediscover ourselves and are set free. Lent is the time of grace that liberates the heart from vanity. It is a time of healing from addictions that seduce us. It is a time to fix our gaze on what abides.

Where can we fix our gaze, then, throughout this Lenten journey? It is simple: upon the Crucified one. Jesus on the cross is life’s compass, which directs us to heaven. The poverty of the world, the silence of the Lord, his loving self-emptying show us the necessity of a simpler life, free from anxiety about things. From the cross, Jesus teaches us the great courage involved in renunciation. We will never move forward if we are heavily weighed down. We need to free ourselves from the clutches of consumerism and the snares of selfishness, from always wanting more, from never being satisfied, and from a heart closed to the needs of the poor. Jesus on the wood of the cross burns with love, and calls us to a life that is passionate for him, which is not lost amid the ashes of the world; to a life that burns with charity and is not extinguished in mediocrity. Is it difficult to live as he asks? Yes, it is difficult, but it leads us to our goal. Lent shows us this. It begins with the ashes, but eventually leads us to the fire of Easter night; to the discovery that, in the tomb, the body of Jesus does not turn to ashes, but rises gloriously. This is true also for us, who are dust. If we, with our weaknesses, return to the Lord, if we take the path of love, then we will embrace the life that never ends. And surely we will be full of joy.