

Ash Wednesday

The microwave oven has to be one of the greatest inventions. It is probably the one appliance in my kitchen that gets the most use besides the refrigerator. Just put some food in the microwave and very quickly it is ready to eat. Another great invention to go along with the microwave oven is the plastic lid that you can put over the plate of food. This plastic lid keeps the microwave from getting splattered when the food inside starts to warm up. The plastic lid is much easier to clean up. Whoever invented the plastic lid must have had to clean up the inside of a microwave oven before.

One evening I wanted to warm up some food for dinner. I put it in the microwave, turned it on, and then started to do something else to prepare for my meal. I could hear the food popping and banging inside like what often happens. Thank goodness for those plastic lids. The microwave sounded that it was done, so I made my way to it. That is when I noticed that the plastic lid was lying on top of the microwave. I had forgotten to put the lid on the plate of food. I thought I had it covered, but no I didn't. I opened the microwave to discover a huge mess. It looked like something out of an Alien movie.

Sometimes our spiritual life can be like this, we think we have it covered, but we discover that we don't. We think that we have thought of everything, but we find out that we missed something very important. We might think, "I'm a good person. I try to live a good life. I don't think that I have any real problems to deal with." All the while, inside, there is actually a mess. That can be the status of our souls. Only God has the ability to look inside us and see the status of our souls. Only God can see the true mess that sin has caused. We think we are fine. We think we have everything covered. God can easily say otherwise.

This is why the season of Lent is so important. Lent gives God the opportunity to help us do some housecleaning. Just like after a long, cold winter we need to do some spring cleaning around the house, we also need to do some spring cleaning in our souls. The three practices mentioned by Jesus in our Gospel reading show us a good way to begin cleaning.

Prayer – not only are we asked to spend more time in prayer but we are also asked to be more attentive when we pray. Many times we can go through our routine when praying. I have completed my prayers, and I realize that I haven't really paid that much attention to what I prayed. Slow down, read the prayers slowly, or if you are not reading them then say them slowly and listen to the words.

Fast – this is a four letter to many people. It is a word that most people want to avoid. Fasting actually helps make our minds more alert. A constantly full stomach makes us complacent. When we fast, we experience hunger pangs. The hunger that we feel is supposed to remind us of our dependence on God to satisfy that hunger. It is meant to draw us closer to God. We can also fast from other things besides food. I suggest fasting from the news, especially if you are a news addict. Most of the news is negative. Watching too much news is like a dark cloud descending upon us. Give yourself a break and fast from any news on the Fridays of Lent.

Almsgiving – many saints have stated that almsgiving brings about the forgiveness of sins. Acts of charity demonstrate that we want to help others, rather than keeping everything for ourselves. When we are generous we are imitating God, who is abundantly generous with us. Giving generously also shows that we trust that God will take care of us. This takes a leap of faith for many people, because the tendency is to hang on to what we have just in case there is an emergency in our lives. We want to make sure that we have enough to survive on. We try to make sure that everything is covered. Yet, God is the only One that can guarantee that everything is covered.

The ashes on our foreheads can demonstrate that our souls are not quite clean, that there is still a mess to clean up. We may have tried to stay perfectly clean, but we are imperfect people. We need to turn to God to help clean up the mess. It's time to roll up our sleeves and get to work. We have the next forty days to help us do it.