

The first reading emphasizes the expectation for almsgiving by requiring the Israelites to present the first fruits of their toil.

The second reading has much to do with prayer, confessing (with our mouth) that Jesus is Lord with a firm belief that He is raised from the dead.

The Gospel, among other things, shows how Jesus went into the desert fasting for 40 days and 40 nights.

As we begin the first week of Lent these three elements should be a significant part of our Lenten endeavors. In fact, the three (almsgiving, prayer and fasting) should be the foundation of all our spiritual endeavors.

In the Gospel for Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6,16-18) Jesus tells us how to act when we give alms, pray and fast. The words Jesus used are, "...when you give alms...", "...when you pray...". "...when you fast..." The words themselves indicate that Jesus expects us to give alms, pray and fast. This is evident by the use of the word "when" in each of the three situations. And Jesus was not talking about Lent, but about our on-going life.

Each one of these elements for a solid spiritual life demand a lot of reflection and discernment. Almsgiving is easy if all we do is add to the Sunday collection. But almsgiving is not just about money. It includes our time, talent as well as our treasure. It involves a great deal more in the care for those who are less fortunate. Visiting the sick, the homebound, those in assisted living all are a part of almsgiving. Do we do enough?

Prayer is simply communication with God. The most difficult part of prayer for most is listening. Effective communication (therefore prayer) required listening. Without listening there is not effective communication. Do we ever simply sit in silence in the presence of the Lord (He is present everywhere). The more we try to listen, the more we are apt to hear and recognize the gentle whisperings of the Spirit within us.

Fasting is probably the endeavor that is least discussed. Yes, the Church requires all to abstain (fast) from meat on Ash Wednesday and on Good Friday. And those between 18 and 59 must fast from meat on all Fridays in Lent. But is that enough? What about the rest of the year?

Fasting from one particular food is called a partial fast. A normal fast abstains from all food but can take water, juice and even broth. This is only done for a short period of time like one or two days.

We all need to get more in tune with this expectation of the Lord ("When you fast..."). If fasting is not in your program now, it should be. Your health, age and body mass should impact on what kind of fast is done. But some kind of fast should be done.

Give alms, pray and fast. Look at each one of these carefully and see where we can increase our dedication to follow more closely the expectations of the Lord.