

**Homily Outline for Ash Wednesday
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
March 2, 2022**

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S.S.P.: We pray, fast, and give alms not for appearance's sake, but to grow in holiness.

I. "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. . . . "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites."

A. Hypocrite. It is a strong word. These words of Jesus in today's Gospel (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18) are meant to catch our attention.

1. The word "hypocrite" comes from comes from the world of the performing arts.
2. The word hypocrite in Greek originally meant "those who wear a mask."
3. In Greek plays all actors wore masks. In other words, a hypocrite is someone who is putting on an act.

B. What Jesus is saying is that those who pray, give alms, and fast should not be playing a part. Their piety needs to be sincere.

C. For the past two years, people have been physically wearing masks in an effort to help prevent or at least reduce the spread of COVID.

D. As government officials are now telling people that physical masks on our faces are no longer required, it is timely that we take Jesus' words to heart and remove the spiritual masks from our religious practices.

II. Jesus gives us very clear instructions about prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

- A. The whole point of each of these practices is that God the Father “who sees what is hidden will repay you.”
- B. The purpose of our Lenten observances is not to bring us human praise, but a heavenly reward.
- C. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting are designed to foster our relationship with God the Father as disciples of His son, Jesus, and as stewards of His creation.
1. By fasting, we limit our intake of food and drink to help us to be spiritually hungry and thirsty for God.
 2. By praying, we engage in conversation with God to discern more clearly His will for us and strengthen our commitment to live in accord with His divine will.
 - a. In terms of prayer, during Lent the Church gives us additional opportunities to go to Mass, receive Holy Communion, have our sins absolved in sacramental confession, and pray the Stations of the Cross, just to name a few of the more important practices of prayer.
 - b. In our prayer, we should also be mindful of events taking place elsewhere in the world, especially the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
 - c. I have no special expertise in military strategy or international diplomacy, but it is apparent to everyone in the free world that the Russian attack on the sovereign country of Ukraine is an unprovoked and unjustified act of aggression, which has already cost the lives and livelihoods of many innocent people.
 - d. Many of us feel helpless as we watched the tragic events unfold on our television screens.

- e. We must remember that our strongest weapon and the most important thing we can do today is pray – pray to Mary, the Queen of Peace, and her Son, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, asking them to come to the assistance of the Ukrainian people in their time of need and bring about a just and lasting peace.
 3. We can also help the Ukrainian people by being generous in today's collection, which will be taken up to aid the Church in Central and Eastern Europe.
 4. This collection was started thirty years ago to help the Catholic Church in Central and Eastern Europe as they emerged from decades of oppression by the Soviet Union and its regime of atheistic communism.
 5. Today, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is uniquely positioned to provide aid to the region through this collection, having built strong relationships with bishops there these last 30 years, and having given so much assistance in the development of the Church's capacity to respond to pastoral and social needs.
 6. A robust response at this moment will allow the Church in the United States to continue to be a strong partner in the rebuilding and restoring of the Church in Central and Eastern Europe, and to give critical and timely humanitarian aid now for Ukraine.
 7. By giving alms or gifts of charity as an act of virtue, we move beyond our self-centered desires to expand our generosity to embrace love of God and love of neighbor more fully.
- III. The practices of fasting, praying and almsgiving have their greatest effect on our spiritual well-being when they are done not out of obligation, but out of love, although a sense of duty is often a helpful starting point.

IV. During our Ash Wednesday liturgy, we get in line twice. Once to receive ashes and again to receive the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ.

A. The first time we line up is to remember a great truth: We are not immortal, and what we have will be gone someday.

1. One of the formulas for the distribution of ashes today is, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."
2. This is a great reminder that nothing we own or accomplish in life will last forever.
3. Ashes mark the beginning of Lent and remind us of our mortality, but we must remember that Lent culminates with the celebration of Easter and the promise of eternal life!

B. The second time we line up today is to remember another great truth: In surrendering everything to God, we can gain Jesus Christ.

1. It is in this giving that we receive, and we do not have to wait to die in order to do so.
2. We are able to experience and savor a foretaste of heaven when we receive Holy Communion.

C. We celebrate Lent not to remind God of who we are or what we have accomplished, but instead to remove the barriers, façades, and masks that have built up—to have the faith to believe that the loving presence of God takes what is dust and makes it eternal.

V. May God give us this grace. Amen.