

**Homily for Ash Wednesday  
February 17, 2021**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield, Illinois**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

With this observance of Ash Wednesday, Lent has begun. Jesus gave us very clear instructions for what we need to do as Christians, as we will hear in the Gospel reading this Sunday for the First Sunday of Lent: “Repent, and believe the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). This is the message with which Jesus began His public ministry.

In the Gospel we just heard today, Jesus was even more specific: we are to pray, fast, and give alms (cf. Matt. 6:1-6, 16-18). He adds that we are not to pray, fast, or give alms like hypocrites, that is, doing these practices for show, for people to see and to win their esteem. Rather, what matters is that God sees what is hidden, and He will repay us accordingly.

The Church gives us even more details about prayer, fasting, and almsgiving during Lent. We are given 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.

In terms of fasting, the Church says there are only two days that we are required to fast: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. On these two days of fast and abstinence, everyone 18 years of age and under 59 is permitted to eat one full meatless meal. Two other meatless meals, sufficient to maintain strength, may be taken according to each person's needs, but together these two should not equal another full meal. Eating between meals is not permitted, but liquids (including milk and fruit juices) are allowed. In addition, everyone 14 years of age and over is bound to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and all the Fridays of Lent. These requirements of fasting and abstinence are not burdensome, and so we are encouraged to embrace these ascetical practices freely and more often beyond the basic minimum.

The expectations for almsgiving, on the other hand, seem to be less precise. Indeed, St. Paul wrote rather simply to the Corinthians that they were to give according to their means (cf. 2 Cor. 8:11-12). Unfortunately, too many Catholics seem to underestimate what God expects us to give back to Him as stewards of His creation. In this regard, a study by the

University of Notre Dame's Catholic Social and Pastoral Research Initiative found that "Catholics are less generous in voluntary financial giving than other Christian groups in the United States." This study included a survey conducted in 2010 of various religious groups of the practice of tithing, that is, giving 10 percent of one's income to religious or charitable causes. When compared to Protestants, Jews, and especially Mormons, Catholics are relatively unlikely to tithe, finding that "only 15 percent of Catholics report giving away 10 percent of their income compared to 27 percent of the rest of the population." In terms of dollars, the study found that the average amount donated by Catholics was \$175 [\$3.37 per week], compared to \$588 [\$11.30 per week] for non-Catholic givers." A national study in 2003 showed that Protestants typically give 2.6 percent of their income to their local churches, while Catholics give 1.2 percent. So Catholics fall far short of the biblical practice of tithing.

Seeking to close this gap in giving, Declaration 11 of our Fourth Diocesan Synod says, "Trusting in God's providence and giving according to their means, the Catholic faithful of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois are called to live as disciples of Our Lord Jesus Christ by giving of their time and talent and striving to fulfill the Biblical command to tithe by

donating the suggested amount of at least 8% of their income to their parishes and 2% to other charities as an expression of their gratitude to God and of their stewardship of His manifold gifts of creation.”

This declaration was one of the more highly discussed and debated topics of the Synod. Tithing is a concept that is not familiar to many Catholics despite its strong biblical roots. The earliest example of tithing in the Bible is found in chapter 14 of the Book of Genesis, where Abram (before God changes his name to Abraham) returns victoriously from battle after rescuing his nephew Lot from captivity and recovering all of the possessions and food supplies that had been stolen from his countrymen. Melchizedek, King of Salem, appears majestically to recognize Abram’s great victory. Melchizedek prefigures the Eucharist by bringing out bread and wine and blessing Abram. In response, the Bible says, “Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything” (Genesis 14:20).

There is much that we can learn from this account. First, we should note that the ten-percent tithe is given after the battle, not before. This is significant in that the offering is not made in supplication as a plea for God to grant the favor of a successful outcome in battle. Rather, the offering is made in gratitude for the victory having already been achieved.

Second, the offering is not made in response to a request from Melchizedek to satisfy some financial need. Melchizedek, for example, did not ask for a donation to pay for repairs for a leaky temple roof. Nor did Abram ask what Melchizedek intended to do with his gift. That is in contrast to our present reality where so much of charitable giving today is based on responding to a demonstrated need. While the desire to know how the money will be spent is understandable from those instances of it being used poorly, as with some charities where only a small percentage of the donations are used for the stated purpose, this approach can also diminish the donor's sense of sacrificial giving in its truest sense.

An objection that some raise is that tithing should be seen as an Old Testament concept that has been superseded by the New Testament, similar to the fact that Christians do not follow the Jewish dietary laws of the Old Testament. The problem with this interpretation is that Jesus did not discard the essential teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures even though certain disciplinary laws are no longer in force. In fact, Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). Thus, for example, Christians are

still expected to follow the Ten Commandments as handed down since the time of Moses.

Another way of looking at this is that the laws of the Old Testament set minimum standards, while the New Testament sets higher expectations. For example, Jesus said, "Every one of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). So anyone who argues that the Old Testament practice of tithing is obsolete is actually saying that a person should give more than ten percent, not less! So let our giving to God be generous according to our means.

Through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, may our observance of Lent turn our hearts more closely to a profound love for Our Lord, who shows His love for us as He comes to us now in this Eucharist.

May God give us this grace. Amen.