**ASH WEDNESDAY (Yr.C). March 2, 2022. WHAT TO GIVE UP FOR LENT? “REND YOUR HEART AND NOT YOUR GARMENTS. RETURN TO ME WITH YOUR WHOLE HEART”.**

**The forty days of Lent is the annual retreat of the people of God in imitation of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness.** And so, as we embark on this season of penance, our God calls us: **“…Return to me you’re your whole heart”.** In other words, we are invited to journey in the desert, with the Lord in a special season of Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving, and Penitence as we prepare to celebrate the feast of Easter.

The prophet Joel in the 1st reading invites us to experience a complete conversion of heart, and not simply regret for our sins. Only God can make us whole, so in turning over our hearts to God, they can begin to heal from the very brokenness, that makes us feel unworthy. St. Paul in the 2nd reading, advises us to “become reconciled to God”, to be healed, made whole, and to be holy.

Hence, today’s gospel instructs us to assimilate the true spirit of fasting and prayer. And so we begin with Ash Wednesday by being invited to effect a real conversion and renewal of life. By marking the sign of the cross with ashes on the foreheads of her children, the Church gives us the following:

1-**A firm CONVICTION** that, a) we are mortal beings, b) our bodies will become dust when buried and ashes if cremated, and c) our life-span is very brief and unpredictable in this world.

2-**A strong WARNING** that we will be eternally punished if we do not repent of our sins, become reconciled with God, asking for His pardon and forgiveness, and do penance. And,

3-**A loving INVITATION** to realize and acknowledge our sinful condition, and return to our loving and forgiving God, asking His pardon and forgiveness, with true penance and the renewal of our life as the prodigal son did.

**What then are the Ash Wednesday Messages and expectations?** We need to do prayerful Fasting and acts of Penance for our sins following the example of Jesus before his public ministry.

**True fasting,** is “Tearing one’s heart and our garments and returning to God”. It is also **“Breaking unjust fetters, freeing the oppressed, shearing one’s bread with the hungry, clothing the naked, and not turning away from the needy relatives and even strangers” (Isaiah 58:6-7).**

**WHAT ARE THE ADVANTANGES OF FASTING?** a) It reduces our **“SPIRITUAL OBESITY”,** or the excessive accumulation of **“Fat”** in our soul, in the form of evil tendencies and evil habits, and evil addictions.

b) It encourages us to share our food and goods with the needy- all this in the spirit of Christ’s teaching which says: **“If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.”**

**And so we ask WHAT DO WE GIVE UP DURING THIS LENT IN ORDER TO MAKE IT FRUITFUL?** 1) **GIVE UP grumbling!** Instead, “In everything you do give thanks.” Constructive criticism is OK, but “Moaning, groaning, and complaining” are not Christian disciplines. And **GIVE UP 10 to 15 minutes in bed!** Instead, use that time in prayer, Bible study and personal devotion.

2) **GIVE UP LOOKING** at people’s worst points. Instead concentrate on their best points. We all have faults. It’s a lot easier to have people overlook our shortcomings when we overlook theirs first.

3**) GIVE UP your worries and anxieties!** Instead trust God with them. Anxiety is spending emotional energy on something we can do nothing about: like tomorrow! Live today and let God’s grace be sufficient. Try to learn the discipline of Love, for “Love covers a multitude of sins.”

4) **GIVE UP TV one evening a week!** Instead give someone your precious gift-your time, say by visiting some lonely or sick or aged person. Moreover, GIVE UP buying anything but essentials for yourself! Instead, give the money to God. The money you would spend on luxuries could help someone meet basic needs. We are called to be stewards of God’s riches, not consumers. **RICE BOWL!!**

**In short,** God wants to transform and free our hearts from all that would keep us captive to selfishness and sin. Therefore, the prophet Joel urges us today: **“Rend your hearts and not your garments…”** And Paul also encourages us, **“Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation”.** And so let’s take advantage of this season of grace and **“Be reconciled with God”.** Amen.