

LENT



As we have said, Lent is a season in its own right and not just a time of preparation for Easter. It is marked by the three disciplines of **prayer**, **fasting**, and **alms-giving**,

all of which are highlighted in the Gospel on Ash Wednesday. During this season Catholics are obliged to take up some form of all three disciplines. We must pray according to the season, perhaps by making the Stations of the Cross. We must fast on the appointed days. And we must give alms to the poor, perhaps through a parish fundraising project or through some other means. These three disciplines are not optional extras for Catholics: they are the foundation stones of our spiritual life during Lent.

PRAYER involves raising the heart (the seat of our acts of the will, that is, our intentions) and our minds (our rational thoughts) to God in acts of Adoration, Thanksgiving, Supplication, and especially Contrition. We do penance for our sins, making up for what we have done wrong. Of course, only Our Lord on the Cross can truly make satisfaction for our sins, but we have to do our part, as St Paul says, '[I] rejoice in my sufferings... and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions' (Col 1:24, RSV). What could possibly be lacking in Christ's sufferings? What was missing on Calvary? We were! So, through our penances, we must now do our part.

FASTING means eating less than we would normally eat. We do not fast in order to lose weight. Nor do we fast so that we can give the money we save to the poor. (That would be to confuse two separate disciplines, fasting and almsgiving.) No! We fast in order to deny ourselves something that is good in itself and which is morally acceptable. We fast so that we can learn to say 'No' to ourselves, and 'No' to some of the good things of this life, so that in saying 'No' to self we can say 'Yes' to Our Lord. 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me' (Lk 9:23-26 et par). The two official days of fasting are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, but many people fast on each Wednesday and Friday during Lent as well as on the old **Ember Days** (the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday of the first full week of Lent).

ALMSGIVING means giving alms (from the Latin *eleemosyna* meaning compassion or pity), that is, giving money to the poor, to those who are more in need than we are. To give alms means not just giving from the spare change we have, but to give what we cannot really afford. In other words, almsgiving should *cost* us something. We should end up going without something that we would otherwise have been able to afford.

ASH WEDNESDAY marks the first day of Lent. On that day, all Catholics go to Mass and ash is imposed on their foreheads in the sign of a cross. Although the Gospel reading on Ash Wednesday warns us not to make a show of our prayers and fasts, nonetheless the ash on our foreheads serves as a public witness of our faith in Christ, as a mark of this holy day, and as a sign of our penitence. The ash comes from the burned remains of the left-over palms from last year's Palm Sunday. On Palm Sunday, the crowds cheered Our Lord's entry into the city of Jerusalem but on Good Friday the same crowd of people demanded His death, 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!' (Lk 23:21 *et par*). So, the ash on our foreheads serves not only as a sign of our penitence but as a reminder of our fickleness and the ease with which we betray Our Lord each time we sin. Curiously, the priest says, as he imposes the ash on each person's forehead, 'Remember, man, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.' But can he not see that at least half of the congregation is made up of women and girls? The point is that the priest is repeating the words that God Himself said to Adam after the very first sin – the original sin – at the time of the Fall in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:19). On Ash Wednesday we are reminded that we all share in the guilt of Adam's sin, and that, in addition, we have all committed our own actual sins. Because of this sinfulness, we will all eventually die (which was never originally part of God's plan, Wisdom 1:13) and our souls will be separated from our bodies. The whole point of our holy religion is that these sins may be forgiven and our souls and



bodies may be reunited once more at the end of time and that we may live forever in heaven with God, a privilege which was forfeited at the time of the Fall when Adam and Eve were driven from paradise by a sword-bearing angel (Gen 3:24).

