

# Tuning up your prayer life during Lent requires focus

written by Bishop Anthony B. Taylor |

*Bishop Anthony B. Taylor delivered this homily on Ash Wednesday, March 5.*

Most of us set aside certain times of the year to give special attention to certain things that we would otherwise tend to let slide and yet which we only neglect to our own detriment.

We have spring cleaning and we winterize our cars, but far more important is this season of Lent in which we take a close look at how well what we say corresponds to what we do.

In today's Gospel Jesus challenges his disciples regarding three pillars of the spiritual life: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Prayer obviously has to do with our relationship with God, fasting has to do with our relationship with ourselves and our own bodies, and almsgiving has to do with our relationship with others, especially the needy.

But these relationships with God, ourselves and others are harmed, rather than helped, when we do these things for the wrong reasons. Which is why it is so good to have this seasons of Lent, this season for a spiritual "tune-up" to readjust (where necessary) how we approach these three crucial relationships.

Prayer is conversation with God. We all know how annoying it is to talk with someone who is always looking over our shoulder to see who might be listening in or who they might move on to talk to next — looking for an upgrade, implying that speaking with us is not all that interesting. Distracted conversations are sort of insulting and usually unproductive.

Jesus says that it is the same when we converse with God in prayer. So when praying we should focus only on him and not on who might be noticing us. And doesn't distracted prayer basically amount to looking over God's shoulder to think about other things that we apparently consider more interesting than him? Distracted prayer is sort of insulting and usually unproductive.

Fasting is about us gaining mastery over ourselves and specifically over distractions deriving from the things we consume, most obviously the desire for food and other desires as well, many of which are not evil in themselves, but which do have many hidden dangers to which we easily become numb.

Dangers deriving from the flesh, desires coming from within ourselves which we unfortunately allow to have power over us and about the seriousness of which we often deceive ourselves — especially when these are sinful desires. Dangers deriving from the world, including the consumer mentality that has so distorted our way of thinking that we no longer even notice how much power this dominant pagan world view has over us.

And dangers deriving from the devious designs of Satan himself, one of whose most effective strategies is to tempt us to ignore some greater good, which we know to be God's will for us, in favor of some lesser good which may not be objectively sinful in itself — it could even be something apparently virtuous for which people may even admire us — but which is a sin for us

because we know deep down in our hearts that choosing that lesser good is a refusal to do what we know to be God's will for us and therefore in our case a sin of disobedience.

Almsgiving is about our obligation to help those who are needy in any way. Acts of charity for sure, but also working to remedy those social inequalities that make charity necessary. The poor will always be with us, but Jesus doesn't mean that we shouldn't do all in our power to reduce their numbers to the greatest degree possible.

The discomfort and hunger of Lenten fasting has the additional purpose of softening our hearts to the plight of those who struggle with food insecurity all year long, to move us to open our wallets to offer the needy discrete direct assistance and to strengthen our will to work to make the world a better place.

Today we begin our annual 40-day spiritual tune-up to readjust our relationship with God, with ourselves and with others in order to make sure that what we do corresponds to what we say we believe. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are three pillars of the spiritual life. May God grant you an especially fruitful Lent this year.