

Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving: Keep It Simple

By **Chris Epplett** | MARCH 5, 2012

One of the first and best pieces of advice I learned early on as a high school journalist was K.I.S.S. — Keep it simple, stupid. I am going to propose the same for this Lenten season. Keep it simple.

In her beauty, the Church seems to always find a way to keep it simple for us — seven sacraments, five precepts, you name it. With Lent, it's also quite simple. Three things: prayer, fasting, almsgiving.

As we begin this Lenten season, we ought to take a closer examination of how we can implement these three keys in order to more deeply enter into a season that prepares us for the next season — Easter.

Prayer

How can we increase our prayer? Recently I was reading an article by Peter Kreeft regarding prayer. In it, he said:

“Let’s get very, very basic and very, very practical about prayer. The single most important piece of advice I know about prayer is also the simplest: Just do it! How to do it is less important than just doing it. Less-than-perfect prayer is infinitely better than no prayer; more perfect prayer is only finitely better than less perfect prayer.

..No program, method, book, teacher, or technique will ever succeed in getting us to start doing anything unless there is first of all that simple, absolute choice to do it. Just say yes.”

Kreeft puts it in simple words. He says something very true and,

fortunately for us, something easily applicable. What's being said is don't hesitate to stop into the chapel this Lent — even if it's for three minutes. Don't think about following a formula or whether your prayer time is “fruitful.”

Don't worry about how the words are incoherent as you thank God for the coming day while getting ready for work. Don't make excuses not to pause at your desk and offer a prayer of gratitude. Don't worry about how you will pray to start a Core meeting. *Just pray.*

Fasting

Now, most Catholics know the obligations for fasting during Lent or they jog their memory via church bulletin or Google search. I won't go on a diatribe about the essential ones. Let's look beyond the surface with fasting.

What I will ask us to consider is other ways we can fast this Lent. You see, fasting (from TV, your iPod, candy, snacking, drinking, excessive spending, etc.) reminds us of our reliance on God. What are the ways we can fast in ministry?

Maybe it means not using the Life Night outline one week and writing/preparing something original. Maybe it means not complaining about the ways a night failed or Core Members who didn't pull through. Or, perhaps, it's intentionally eliminating a resource, such as the projector, for a couple of weeks of Edge or Life Night.

Not every parish has a sound system, projector, wireless microphone or laptop. Fast. Because, you see, the more we have, the more we tend to forget about God. Even in ministry. Our prayer is as ardent because we have all the resources (even through the opposite should be true).

I work at a parish where most of the teens are very blessed, living in households with middle to upper middle incomes. For them, being convinced of a God isn't the issue. Being convinced they *need* God is

the issue, in general.

When we have every need met — and met quickly — it's as if we forget God is there because we don't need Him — everything's taken care of.

In fasting we recall we have nothing except *through* God, *because* of God. Everything in the world — the world itself — exists because of the love of the Creator. Because of God. So, as we fast this Lenten season, let us remember our reliance on God and thank Him more frequently for the gifts He bestows on us.

We could all fast for selfish reasons. Jesus knew this, warning in Matthew's gospel, "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."

So, when we fast, make it challenging. Most of all, make about God. Not you.

Lastly, we are to give alms. In the same gospel passage, Jesus says, "When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you."

Giving to others is a response to love. We must ask ourselves: How can we give our time, talent and treasure more this Lent? I'd venture to say this looks different for each of us. But we can all consider increasing our charitable donations, especially to our parishes. No more excuses about the size of our paychecks. As I just said, nothing material belongs to us anyhow. By giving it, we recognize what we "give" never belonged to us in the first place. It's all about trust.

Consider not just the material. How can we be more generous with our

time, especially in our families, within the ministry, with our friends, our co-workers, with our parish families? Are we burying talents that God is asking us to share for His glory? Pray about this. Discern it. Veni Sancte Spiritus.

Repenting

These three pieces come together in that the season is all about repentance. It's a preparation for a season that celebrates the resurrection, an event that changed history. Because of the resurrection we call ourselves Catholic and we ought to live that everyday.

Just see it all as a long overdue cleansing, one that requires some major scrubbing — God is on His hands and knees trying to polish our souls to receive Him more intimately.