

**Homily for Ash Wednesday
February 14, 2024**

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

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Today, Ash Wednesday, marks the beginning of our Lenten journey, a journey that lasts forty days and leads us towards the joy of Easter, the victory of life over death.

While the Church observes Ash Wednesday today, the world around us is fixated on Valentine's Day, with people rushing around to purchase cards, flowers, or gifts to celebrate a day dedicated to what our secular culture views as love. But even the secular world is trying to redefine what love is all about. A front-page article in this morning's issue of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL reports that,

This Valentine's Day, more people are saying "I love you" – to themselves. Self-gifting is on the rise for Cupid's holiday as more consumers grow tired of receiving duds from their spouse or significant other, enjoy the empowerment of treating themselves or celebrate the single life. It's yet another way Feb. 14 is getting a makeover when nearly half the U.S. adult population is unmarried and many say they aren't looking for

a romantic relationship. The trend is a boon for retailers and could help reverse sagging Valentine's Day sales. . . . Last year, 39% of U.S. consumers said they bought themselves a Valentine's Day gift, according to a poll of more than 1,000 people."¹

Well, the idea of "self-gifting" is about as far away from the spirit of Saint Valentine than one could get! Many people have apparently forgotten that the color red is associated with St. Valentine's Day because Saint Valentine died as a martyr. Valentine was a holy priest in Rome, who assisted the martyrs in the persecution under Claudius II. He was apprehended, and sent by the emperor to the prefect of Rome, who, on finding all his promises to make him renounce his faith ineffectual, commanded him to be beaten with clubs, and afterwards, to be beheaded. He was executed on February 14, about the year 270. Rather than celebrating some sort of romantic sentimentality today, I suggest that it would be more appropriate on St. Valentine's Day to focus on the sacrifices that true love demands of us: sacrifices not for ourselves, but for others.

Martyrdom does not refer only to the ultimate sacrifice of giving one's life for the faith, but includes the many other large and small ways that we die to our own desires and wishes so that we might return to God with all our heart.

As we begin this Lenten season, I hope that each one of you will examine what sort of sacrifice you can make or perhaps are already making that will allow your love for Christ and your commitment to live as His disciple to become ever deeper, for without sacrifice, our love for the Lord remains empty or even unfulfilled. In fact, one of the most powerful ways that we can unite ourselves to Him is through uniting our sacrifices to the sacrifice that He made for us on the Cross.

While giving up a favorite food or drink, a particular meal, or something we enjoy doing, such as watching our favorite television show, surfing the internet, or playing video games, pales in comparison to the sacrifice our Lord made for us in laying down His life on the cross, these mortifications do give us the opportunity to offer up our discomfort by dying to ourselves so that we may return to Him. We also imitate the love of Christ when we go out of our way to do something to help others.

The best practices for Lent are those suggested by Jesus himself in the Gospel that we just heard, which is read at Mass every year on Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18), namely, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The whole point of each of these practices is that God the Father “who sees what is hidden will repay you.”

The purpose of our Lenten observances is not to bring us human praise, but a heavenly reward. Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are designed to foster our relationship with God the Father as disciples of His son, Jesus, and as stewards of His creation.

By fasting, we limit our intake of food and drink to help us to be spiritually hungry and thirsty for God. By praying, we engage in conversation with God to discern more clearly His will for us and strengthen our commitment to live in accord with His divine will. By giving alms or gifts of charity as an act of virtue, we move beyond our self-centered desires to expand our generosity to embrace love of God and love of neighbor more fully.

The practices of fasting, praying, and almsgiving have their greatest effect on our spiritual well-being when they are done not out of obligation, but out of love, although a sense of duty is often a helpful starting point.

Father Robert Spitzer, a Jesuit priest who speaks of the four levels of happiness, points out that we achieve true happiness when we move beyond level one happiness of pleasure-seeking and level two happiness of personal achievement, to the more fulfilling experiences of level three happiness of self-giving and level four happiness of union with God.

So our Lenten practices are intended not to make us glum, but are designed to bring us true happiness!

In our first reading today we heard the prophet Joel telling the Jewish people to return to the Lord with their whole heart through fasting, weeping and mourning. This message is one that is not limited to the people of Joel's time. Quite the opposite, we must take this message to heart and put it into practice in our daily lives. To "return to God with all your heart" on this Lenten journey means embracing the cross, and following Christ along the path which leads to Calvary, and through the cross to the resurrection. It is a journey which teaches us each day to abandon our selfishness and self-absorption in order to make room for our Lord, who opens our minds and hearts to love Him and others as He loves us.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as we enter into this period of penance during the season of Lent, it is my hope that the sacrifices you make will bring you closer to our Lord in this life so that you might spend all eternity with Him in the life that is to come.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Suzanne Kapner, "Happy Valentine's Day to Me! Why 'Self Gifting' Is on the Rise," THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, February 13, 2024, accessed online at https://www.wsj.com/business/retail/valentines-day-self-gift-retail-single-fb6ec97b?st=018q6a06fl8irst&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.