

**Homily for Ash Wednesday
February 18, 2026**

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

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The season of Lent is known by many as a time to do penance for our sins by giving something up that requires real sacrifice. Perhaps we all have some favorite Lenten practices that we do almost routinely every year. But it would be good to reflect on what it is that we should give up and why we should give it up. The best source for such guidance, of course, is Jesus himself.

In the Gospel for Ash Wednesday (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18) that we just heard, Jesus spoke of the practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. All three of these practices involve giving something up that is precious to us.

Prayer involves giving up some of our time, shifting our focus from the many tasks that make demands on our time to spend that time instead with God in praise and adoration, asking forgiveness for our sins, offering thanks for all the gifts of God's creation, and seeking God's graces and assistance for ourselves the needs of others.

Fasting involves giving up some favorite food or drink. The Lenten regulations in this regard are actually quite minimal: Abstinence means that everyone 14 years of age and over is bound to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and all the Fridays of Lent. Fasting applies to everyone from age 18 until age 59 on only two days: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. On these two days of fast and abstinence, only one full meatless meal is permitted. Two other meatless meals, sufficient to maintain strength may be taken according to each person's needs, but together these two should not equal another full meal. Eating between meals is not permitted, but liquids (including milk and fruit juices) are allowed. To disregard completely the law of fast and abstinence is seriously sinful. Many people fast throughout Lent, not just on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Doing so helps to curb our appetites and increase our self-discipline.

Almsgiving involves giving up some of our money for charitable causes rather than spending it on ourselves. This may be the hardest and most misunderstood of the Lenten practices. While every donation involves diverting some of our money from things that we might buy for our own enjoyment, there is a difference between giving away some extra

cash that we may have on hand and foregoing something that we would really like for ourselves in order to use that money for someone else's benefit.

Jesus describes this difference clearly in the parable of the widow's mite. The Gospel of Saint Mark tells us how Jesus "sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, 'Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood'" (Mark 12:41-44).

The Bible also tells us about the obligation to tithe our money by giving ten percent of our income to God. The earliest example of tithing in the Bible is found in chapter 14 of the Book of Genesis, where Abram (before God changes his name to Abraham) returns victoriously from battle after rescuing his nephew Lot from captivity and recovering all of the possessions and food supplies that had been stolen from his countrymen. Melchizedek, King of Salem, appears majestically to recognize Abram's

great victory. Melchizedek prefigures the Eucharist by bringing out bread and wine and blessing Abram. In response, the Bible says, “Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything” (Genesis 14:20).

At our Fourth Diocesan Synod in 2017, we adopted Declaration 11, which calls for the Catholic faithful of our diocese “to live as disciples of Our Lord Jesus Christ by giving of their time and talent and striving to fulfill the Biblical command to tithe by donating the suggested amount of at least 8% of their income to their parishes and 2% to other charities as an expression of their gratitude to God and of their stewardship of His manifold gifts of creation.”

Just as Abram gave his gift in gratitude for what God had given to him, we, too, are called to be generous in giving to the Church as a way of showing our gratitude to God for all that He has given to us.

Sadly, a recent [study](#) of giving by denomination listed Catholics at second from the bottom, donating only 1.8% of their income to parishes in a 2023 survey. Only Episcopalians (Anglicans in the United States) gave less, coming in at 1.7%. The highest denomination was Seventh-day Adventists, who tithed an average of 4.2% in 2021 global data, followed by Evangelical Christians at 4.1%.

Some may object that tithing should be seen as an Old Testament concept that has been superseded by the New Testament, similar to the fact that Christians do not follow the Jewish dietary laws of the Old Testament. The problem with this interpretation is that Jesus did not discard the essential teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures even though certain disciplinary laws are no longer in force. In fact, Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). Thus, for example, Christians are still expected to follow the Ten Commandments as handed down since the time of Moses.

Another way of looking at this is that the laws of the Old Testament set minimum standards, while the New Testament sets higher expectations. For example, Jesus said, "Every one of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). So let our giving to God be generous according to our means, and may all of our Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving help us to grow in holiness as we seek to become saints!

May God give us this grace. Amen.