

Fasting, almsgiving, prayer can help renew conversion to Christ

By Father Robert J. Kennedy
Guest columnist

Conversion to Christ is for everyone, and Lent is the faith community's special time for it. It is a season to turn our hearts more fully toward Christ, to renew our baptismal commitment, and to practice once again a Gospel lifestyle.

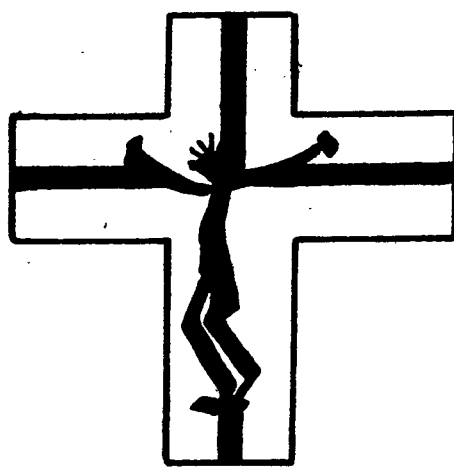
The best way for Christian people to engage in this conversion is by doing Lenten penance: not as a self-inflicted punishment for sins, but as a practice of discipleship which helps us to learn again the holy life in Christ. The tried and tested trinity of Lenten penitential practice is prayer, fasting and almsgiving (see Matthew 6:1-16, 16-18). These are penances worth doing, and I want to make some practical suggestions about how we might engage in them during these six weeks of Lent.

What is important about our Lenten PRAYER is not its quantity, but its quality. More is not necessarily better. Whether we pray five or 50 minutes each day, our prayer is meant to strengthen our friendship with God, so that we may more clearly see our lives with God's eyes and understand life's circumstances with God's heart. And if as Christians we love our neighbor and our God as two dimensions of a single love, then our prayer will involve not only the lifting up of our hearts and minds to God but also to our brothers and sisters, especially those in need. Thus our prayer, no matter how private, will always be prayed in the midst of the community.

Practically, let us first put regular prayer into our lives if it is not already there. It can occur in morning, evening or any time in between. It can follow the structure of the Liturgy of the Hours, the rosary or the stations of the cross, or it can

be an informal conversation with God in the car on the way to work. Prayer may also take the form of reading the Scriptures or a book of solid spiritual or theological wisdom. We may also decide to pray for some specific cause — world peace, racial understanding in South Africa, an end to world hunger, etc. — or for some specific persons — abused children, people with AIDS and their loved ones, catechumens, farmers of the world, etc. — or for some specific gift — patience, acceptance of the family next door, a thankful spirit, etc.

FASTING has not been much in evidence in church life recently, although many persons in our society have fasted as a way of witnessing to some value or cause, such as world peace, responsible stewardship of earth's resources, injustices to farm workers or the homeless. To be holy and healthy, however, Christian people need to rediscover fasting as a means of emptying themselves of selfishness and of being filled with Christ. Fasting from food and drink or our favorite pleasure or entertainment is still a viable way of doing this. Christian fasting also challenges us to ask whether we could adopt a simpler lifestyle or how we are spending our time and money. As a consumer, is this purchase really necessary? As a husband, wife, parent or child, am I spending an adequate amount of time with my spouse, children, parents? As a teen, can I offer some of my babysitting time free of charge? As a gifted person, have I let my talents stagnate while I watched TV? How will I change if answers to any of these questions are not in line with solid Christian values? Other forms of "positive" fasting include a humble and grateful appreciation of our God-given gifts, renewed care for our



GROSS OF GLORY LIFE IN CHRIST

mental and physical health, and the study of some important issue from all points of view, especially one that may bother us more deeply.

ALMSGIVING is the contribution in some way to the work of Christ in the world. It's putting our money where our mouth is — and not just our money, but also our values, talents, time and energy. Lenten almsgiving obviously involves the donation of money to charitable causes and projects. But it also includes living Christian values in our workplace, giving our time at a soup kitchen or in getting an elderly neighbor to the doctor, and offering our personal skills so that others might develop theirs. It further includes our getting involved with issues which promote a more Christian and human world. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy are not just one-on-one; they are also works of justice and reconciliation for the life of the world.

These are just a few suggestions for penances worth doing during Lent. Many more could be added.

City judge

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tions in Brighton Town Court last November on charges of resisting arrest and third-degree criminal trespass.

Regan said he will issue bench warrants for any activist who does not adhere to his sentence by not showing up for the community service work.

Maher, who read from the Bible before he was sentenced, said that he will follow the statement on non-violent civil disobedience released by the Office of Bishop Matthew H. Clark in December and perform community work. The statement supported the right of diocesan members to engage in non-violent civil disobedience, but noted that those who do so "must also be willing to accept the legal consequences of such action."

Maher said that he was aware of Long's attempt to discourage other activists from doing the prescribed community work, but he hoped all five Catholics arrested would adhere to the sentence. "I know there is an attempt by David to encourage people to resist the community work," said Maher, who will do clerical work at the American Cancer Society as his sentence. "I would hope that if we (the five Catholic activists arrested) were setting an example for other Catholics, we would all do our community service work."

"Yes, I'm definitely going to do it," said Parulski, who will do maintenance work at Charlotte Middle School. "Judge Regan bent over backwards for us. He still has to give us something because we did break just laws to protest what we believe to be an unjust law (abortion)."

Regan's sentence included a one-year conditional discharge, meaning that if each member performs the community service and stays away from Highland Hospital's east wing for one year, their convictions will be erased from court records.



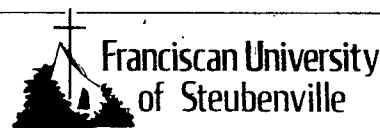
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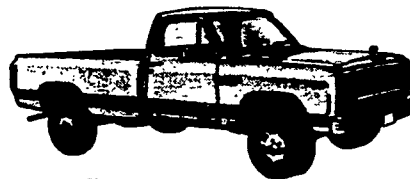


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