

Dear readers,

Every year, Lent offers us a providential occasion to advance in our Christian life and to spur us on to obtain again the mercy of God so that, we ourselves, may become more merciful towards our neighbour. The Church offers us several specific commitments which will help us to pursue our spiritual development: these are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. I would like here to dwell on the subject of giving alms. It is a definite occasion to come to the aid of those in need, and at the same time, an ascetic effort to free ourselves from the attachments to the goods of this world. How strong is the enticement to material goods, and how firm must be our decision to not idolize them! Jesus affirms in a clear manner: "You cannot serve God and money." (Lk 16, 13).



The giving of alms helps us to conquer this permanent temptation: it teaches us to go to meet the needs of our neighbour and to share with others that which, through divine grace, we possess. Almsgiving is based on a sort of justice; because the most legitimately acquired goods only belong to the rich as a deposit that Providence has entrusted to them, so as to be their dispensers, first of all to themselves and their close relations, and secondly to the poor. Almsgiving is not only a counsel, but a precept; the rich are the debtors of the poor of Jesus Christ; they unjustly hold in their possession that which does not belong to them, when they do not give alms, proportionately to the resources at their disposal, and in keeping with the needs of the poor. According to the teaching of the Gospels, we are not the owners but the administrators of the goods which we possess: these must not be considered as our exclusive property, but as the means through which the Lord calls each one of us to be an instrument of charity. The beloved apostle, after Jesus, said clearly that the mercy, the charity, the almsgiving practiced towards the poor is the proof and the guarantee of our love for God; "He that hath the substance of this world, and shall see his brother in need, and shall shut up his bowels from him, how doth the charity of God abide in him?" (1 Jn 3, 17). Saint Augustine in turn reminds us of this same truth with an extraordinary insistence: "Yes, God had willed to have need of us, and you would dare to close your hand! However, he only demands of us a part of that which He has provided for us; for what have you that you have not received? Be therefore the administrator of the goods of God and not the usurpers."

The Gospel sheds light on a characteristic aspect of Christian almsgiving: it must remain hidden. "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doth," said Jesus, "so that thy alms may be in secret" (Mt 6, 3-4). The direct motive for giving alms is to help our neighbour. But the motive for almsgiving which is much more important than helping our neighbour, invisible to the eyes of the flesh but nevertheless the primary reason for giving alms, is the love of God and the desire to do all for the greater glory of God. "Give to your brother who is in indigence," Saint Augustine tells us. "To which brother? To Jesus Christ himself!" Thus, all must be accomplished for the glory of God and not for our own. If, in doing a good action, we don't seek the glory of God and the true well-being of our brothers, but rather we expect in return a personal advantage or simply some praise, we place ourselves from that moment apart from the spirit of the Gospels.

Almsgiving trains to generosity and love. On this subject, how significant is the Gospel episode of the widow who, in her destitution, casts into the treasury of the Temple "all she had, even her whole living" (Mk 12, 44). This little money, insignificant, becomes an eloquent symbol: this widow gave to God not what she had as superfluous, and not even all that she has, but all that she is. Herself, all entirely. Almsgiving involves and commits he who gives. The giving of alms is more than a limited, accomplished act. Almsgiving is a habitual disposition to give, to be generous, and urges on to be attentive to the needs and to the deprivations of others. I no longer choose to whom and when I am going to give. I am ready to give at any moment and to any person. I do not choose my reasons and when I have nothing more to give, I have satisfied my obligations of almsgiving. Yes, almsgiving implies primarily to love and to find joy in giving.

Dear readers, Lent invites us to train ourselves spiritually, particularly through the practice of almsgiving, in order to grow in charity and to recognize Jesus himself in the poor. May the Blessed Virgin Mary, faithful Mother of the Lord, help us to engage ourselves in the "spiritual combat" of Lent with the weapons of prayer, fasting and the practice of almsgiving, so as to reach the celebration of Easter being entirely renewed in spirit.

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