

On Friday morning as I sat in the office checking email and returning phone calls, I received a call from a young man who had a couple of questions for a priest. His couple of questions turned into an hour and a half conversation. He asked some very deep questions, like “why would a God who is all good and all powerful allow such terrible suffering?” and “why should anyone try to be a Christian when it seems that so many Christians do not act like Jesus?” During that conversation, the young man shared with me that he was raised Catholic but now describes himself as Agnostic, not sure whether there is really a God who loves us and created us.

Reflecting on that conversation, brings to mind that great quote from St. Augustine: “O Lord! You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you!” It seems to me that this young man’s heart is restless. Why else would he have spent an hour and a half on the phone with a Catholic priest whom he has never met debating the merits of Christianity?!? And I pray that his heart will return to the God who created that young man for Himself.

This is why the Lord offers us this holy season of Lent. Who among us can claim that he or she has not in some way, whether small or great, lost sight of the Lord. Who among us can claim that our heart is not restless for a deeper relationship with the God who made us for Himself? We may not go so far as doubting the existence of God, but we certainly at times lose sight of God by the many distractions that keep us from a relationship with Him. We certainly at times separate ourselves from God by our sins. This is why the Lord offers us the holy season of Lent—so that we may “Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”

And how do we do this? How do we turn our restless hearts back to the Lord? In the Gospel, Jesus lays out for us the ancient way of penance, a way that has been followed by Christians for 2,000 years: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. And notice the Lord's words. He does not say "if you give alms" or "if you pray" or "if you fast." No, Jesus says, "when you give alms" and "when you pray" and "when you fast." Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are not optional disciplines that we can choose if we want. They are the path of virtue and holiness in the Christian life. They are necessary for us as disciples of Christ.

When we give alms to the poor, we grow in Christian generosity. Almsgiving leads us away from selfishness and toward that charity which puts the needs of another before my own needs. Find ways to give this Lent. Perhaps we can give through donations of clothes or food to organizations that can distribute it to those in need. Perhaps we can give the gift of a snack or a bottle of water to the homeless we encounter on our streets. Give to the poor and see Christ in them and love Christ in them.

When we fast, we grow in the virtue of self restraint. Giving up good things like food or drink strengthens our will to reject the evil temptations, like gluttony or lust, when they come. And fasting should serve as a valuable reminder to pray. When we fast or abstain from meat, or when we take on other optional penances, and we feel that desire for what we are giving up, it should be a reminder for us that the longing of our restless heart is truly for the Lord. Fasting should lead us to prayer.

And when we pray, we lift our minds and hearts to the Lord. Prayer is the food of our spiritual life; and without a regular life of prayer, we will starve. But prayer requires discipline and even planning. If we rely only on “finding time for prayer” rarely will we find it. Let us instead “make time for prayer.” Most of us keep a schedule for the important things that we don’t want to miss. Why not add prayer to that schedule? Let this Lent be a time of true spiritual renewal.

The Lord has made us for Himself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Him. May our Lenten discipline of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving lead us to deeper conversion. May we turn our hearts to Lord so that we may rest in Him.