

“Is this the manner of fasting that I wish, of keeping a day of penance: that a man bow his head like a reed and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? This rather is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thong of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own” (Isaiah 58:5-7).

For the past two weeks, we have reflected together on the first two traditional marks, or spiritual disciplines, of Lent: prayer and fasting. Today we reflect on the third, just as important, mark – almsgiving. The word “alms” ultimately derives, by way of Old English, from the ancient Greek word *eleos*, meaning “pity, mercy, compassion.” It is important to note here that the word does not refer to an emotion or feeling. Rather, it refers to an action, a concrete way that we reach out in mercy and compassion to persons in need. We *give* alms, we don’t feel alms, by taking action to address the needs of others. That is the third mark of Lent.

It is also a crucial aspect of our Christian faith throughout the year. When we care for those in need, we continue the ministry of Jesus, in whose heart the poor and needy always had a special place. This isn’t necessarily because Jesus found them to be particularly appealing or deserving of his love. It is because their need is so obvious that meeting that need becomes a clear and powerful sign of the Kingdom of God at work: righting wrongs, overturning injustice, restoring the world to the loving order God has planned all along. Everything Jesus did in his ministry, every act of charity, every miracle was a sign of God’s Kingdom – what the world is supposed to be like, what it can be like, what it will be like when we join Christ in his saving work. That is why almsgiving is a central part of our faith and of every Lenten season.

Individually, we can give alms in many ways, as many as there are people in need. As a community of faith, we are called each year to give alms together with our brothers and sisters throughout the Diocese of Erie by participating in the annual Catholic Services Appeal (CSA). By supporting the CSA, we enable over ninety different diocesan ministries to help meet the needs of thousands of people across our diocese each year. What a powerful sign of God’s Kingdom at work; what a powerful way to continue Christ’s ministry! Please prayerfully consider how you can give alms this Lent and how you can include in your almsgiving support for the CSA.