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Meditations: Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Some reflections that can enrich our prayer as we begin the season of Lent.

03/08/2025

- The alms arising from a pure heart
- Saint Matthew left everything and gave his entire life
- Love for God and neighbor

THE DAYS after Ash Wednesday have led us to reflect on the great value of

prayer and, along with it, on fasting and almsgiving as practices that show our desire to convert our heart to God. The prophet Isaiah exclaims that only a right interior disposition, the source of all sacrifice, leads to a true change, visible in the works of mercy done for others: *If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday (Is 58:9-10).*

That is why we should ask God for an interior purity that enables us to offer others the help they need and not the help we want to give: “Lord, teach me your paths, so that I may follow your truth” (cf. *Ps 85*). Saint Josemaría once lamented: “It is sad to see what some people understand by almsgiving: a few pennies or some

old clothes. They seem not to have read the Gospel.”^[1] True almsgiving arises from interior self-giving, from an act of love towards another person. Everyone needs our alms: in our family, the people we work with, those who receive a service through our job, etc.

“Isn’t the whole Gospel summed up in the one commandment of charity? Therefore, the Lenten practice of almsgiving becomes a means to deepen our Christian vocation. The Christian, when he freely offers himself, testifies that it is not material wealth that dictates the laws of existence, but love. Therefore, what gives value to almsgiving is love, which inspires different forms of giving.”^[2]

WHEN READING the Gospel account of Saint Matthew's vocation, we are reminded of something that caught the attention of the Pharisees and scribes. The work carried out by the future apostle meant giving priority to the small personal power Rome conferred on him over the traditions of his people; this could lead to a certain attachment to material goods, above the Law of God. But Mathew saw something different in Jesus, which led him to leave everything and follow in his footsteps. That is why he abandoned the lifestyle he had chosen, the security and well-being his position gave him, his personal goals in life. And that decision made him so happy that he offered a great banquet in his house for Jesus (cf. *Lk* 5:29).

Jesus doesn't seem to have looked for apostles among the teachers of the Law, nor even among the most observant Jews. On the contrary, he

chooses someone who was viewed by the Jewish society of that time as a sinner. The mystery of God's mercy is revealed here once again. "The Gospels present us with a true paradox: those who seem to be the farthest from holiness can even become a model of the acceptance of God's mercy and show us its marvelous effects in their own lives."^[3] —

Like Matthew, we too are called to "live by mercy in order to be instruments of mercy. When we feel in need of forgiveness and consolation, we learn to be merciful to others."^[4] — Many of those around Matthew rigorously complied with the Law; but they didn't feel in need of God, which hardened their hearts and prevented them from giving themselves as true alms. The future apostle, in contrast, left all his possessions to follow Jesus, giving his

whole life as alms for those around him.

THE TEXT IN which Saint Matthew describes his own vocation cites some words of Jesus addressed to the Pharisees: *Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice"* (Mt 9:13, cf. Hos 6:6).

Although many people may not have noticed that reference to the prophet Hosea, the rectitude of Christ's actions was impossible not to see. He went about doing good, attending to the needs of others, healing the sick. Jesus' attention to those around him is "a synthesis of the entire Christian message: true religion consists in love of God and neighbor. This is what gives value to worship and to the practice of the precepts."^[5] —

One way to offer alms during this Lent can be to consider the love with which we carry out our daily actions. The precepts of the people of Israel were aimed at finding God's love in so many details of each day, but that good intention often ended up becoming the fulfillment of acts that failed to reach their true meaning. This Lent can be an opportunity to increase our desire to put Christ at the center of our lives. As Saint Josemaría stressed: "We must decide to truly follow Him. May our Lord be able to use us so that, placed as we are at all the crossroads of the world – and at the same time placed in God – we become salt, leaven and light. Yes, you are to be in God, to enlighten, to give flavor, to produce growth and new life. But never forget that we are not the source of this light: we only reflect it."^[6] If we present Mary with our deepest intentions, our eagerness to convert our heart to God, she will intercede

before God so that we can carry them out.

[1] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 26.

[2] Benedict XVI, Message, 30 October 2007.

[3] Benedict XVI, Audience, 30 August 2006.

[4] Francis, Audience, 14 September 2016.

[5] Benedict XVI, Angelus, 8 June 2008.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 250.