

Ash Wednesday 2018

02/14/18

If you ever doubted God has a sense of humor, consider the current liturgical season. It begins on Valentine's Day and the great celebration of Easter will be on April Fool's Day. Obviously the Church did not consider the ramifications of these two secular holidays when establishing the rules for setting the dates of the liturgical calendar. Oh well...

Reflecting on the practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving in Jesus' day, one author calls them the Olympics of piety. He says we turn a good thing into the only thing and then put it into competition with everything else. He notes that almsgiving, prayer and fasting had been put into competition not only with each other, but with all aspects of Jewish identity. How you lived your life no longer mattered.

A man would stand on a corner and pray as loudly as possible in order to be heard because that was how one manifested piety. Much like the Olympians in South Korea, those who prayed were in a piety competition. How the rest of life was lived was immaterial. The gestures had become disconnected from any inward belief or conviction.

The author goes on to say that this is an object lesson for us and our ever-present tendency to make a God of what is not God. To worship what is not holy. To confuse ego with fidelity. Some folks feel Lent today is much easier. Encouragement is given to do positive things, so many people don't give up much anymore.

Lawrence Mick suggests that, following the Second Vatican Council, the Church decided to risk treating us like adults. While many of the previous rules have been removed, the Church challenges us to observe Lent with all seriousness, to take responsibility for our own spiritual growth. This is a lot harder than simply following rules but also bears the potential of really making Lent a time of change that could last more than just 40 days.

As you come forward to receive ashes, remember that we are asked to change our lives and our hearts during Lent. The ashes are not a sign of our holiness but a sign that we fail and seek to do better, to be the best-version-of-ourselves.