



# LOOKING THROUGH STAINED GLASS

A Column by Fr. Tom

## Almsgiving: What's an Alm?

So far this Lent, we have explored two of the three main practices of Lent – prayer and fasting. That leaves us only with an exploration of almsgiving. Although some mention of almsgiving has come up in previous columns, let's dig a little deeper.

I suppose it might be good to begin by answering the question that is contained in the title of this column: what is an alm? The word “alm” comes from the Old English *ælmesse* and ultimately from the Greek *eleēmosýnē*, a derivative of *éleos*, which means pity or mercy. In fact the term *éleos* is the same root from which we derive *eleison*, such as “Kyrie eleison,” or “Lord, have mercy,” from the Penitential Rite in the Mass.

So what is almsgiving? It is giving mercy or pity to another. The word “pity” in the religious context is more akin to compassion [entering into another's pain] than sympathy [feeling sorry for another].

We are called to give alms during Lent, because it allows us to get out of our self-consumption to not only find interest in another, but also to feel and to respond to the pain of another. This is why, in previous columns, we related giving food to the poor to the hunger pangs we might feel from fasting. Almsgiving requires more than feeling, it requires that we act from those feelings. After all, it is called almsgiving. We often think of almsgiving as giving to the poor (as mentioned above), and this is surely one of the great ways that we can show compassion for another. However, almsgiving can take on many forms. Who are the people in your life that would benefit from your mercy or

compassion? For example, do you have a friend who is lonely? Do you know someone who would benefit more from a dinner together with you than a gift card to Publix? Does a family member, including your spouse or child, need a reminder that you love her or him? Do you have a relative who needs your forgiveness? Is there someone from whom you need to ask forgiveness? Can you make an effort during the remainder of Lent to repair a relationship in your life, or maybe mediate the reconciliation of two people you know who haven't spoken for years? All of these things are also almsgiving. They require your feeling compassion for another and acting on that compassion to ease the pain of another.

Giving alms is a Christian, Christ-like, action. We often relate prayer and fasting during Lent to Jesus' 40 days in the desert, but what about the rest of Jesus' ministry? He prayed, he fasted, but he also gave alms [felt compassion]. All we need do is look to any one of the stories of healing done by Jesus. For example, in the case of the paralyzed man who was lowered through a roof by his friends [Matt 9:2-8], Jesus reached out to the man and his friends, he forgave the man's sins, and he healed the man's pain (cured his paralysis). That is three distinct ways that Jesus gave alms to that man and his friends. During the rest of Lent (and the rest of our lives), let's look beyond ourselves and do what Christ did – He gave alms to relieve the pains of others.