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Why Catholics Fast: Searching for the Tradition

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At a friend's home a few years ago, I sat across the dining table from a Muslim woman who had been born in Egypt and had lived in many cities around the world. Ramadan had recently ended; Lent would shortly begin, and fasting became a topic of conversation. She spoke knowledgeably about Islam's central beliefs and about her own varied experiences of the rigorous dawn-to-dusk Ramadan fast. I found myself wondering how many Catholics could have done such a credible job explaining our Lenten fasting practices.

While I knew the Lenten regulations, I was not at all clear about what lay behind the rules or how to incorporate the core of the tradition into my own life. Two questions arose: is there a place for Lenten fasting in contemporary Catholic spirituality? And how would such a discipline be constructed not only in light of Scripture and tradition, but also in light of contemporary insights and concerns?

If we define fasting as partial or complete abstinence from food and drink for a specified period of time, then fasting has been part of almost every religious tradition. And it is not limited to religious traditions: fasting has also been used for political purposes and for health reasons.

From the second century into our present post-Vatican II era, the primary source of Catholic teaching on the spiritual discipline of fasting has been Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18. In these passages, fasting takes its place with prayer and almsgiving as one of three pillars of Christian spiritual practice. These Gospel verses are proclaimed every year on Ash Wednesday and have become so familiar that we may perhaps overlook the centrality of the teaching.

The entire passage is found in the middle of Matthew's lengthy recounting of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus teaches his disciples the Beatitudes and other essentials of the Christian life. When we read these verses carefully, we notice that each of the teachings on prayer, on fasting and on almsgiving receives similar attention. Each teaching is built in parallel phrases. The language is repetitive, ideal for memorizing. Each teaching begins with a negative description of the practice (what the hypocrites do) and counters it with a positive (what the followers of Jesus must do). The difference, for all three teachings, lies in our motivation. Do we pray or fast or give to the poor because we will be acclaimed here and now? Or do we seek, through our actions, a more intimate relationship with God? For Christians the verses are a rich resource. They tell us that the practice of fasting must be accorded equal standing with prayer and almsgiving.

All three Synoptic Gospels give an account of the 40 days Jesus spent fasting in the desert. Here is a masterful lesson in setting straight our priorities. As in the verses from Matthew, it is the interior disposition of a fasting Christian that matters. Joseph F. Wimmer, in his book *Fasting in the New Testament: A Study in Biblical Theology*, writes: As an evocation of Jesus in the desert, fasting can also allow us to grasp the sublimity of his answer to the devil: It is written, one shall not live by bread alone.' In the midst of hunger, fear, and deprivation of fasting, a new

horizon appears. We become aware that things of the spirit are superior, that we must not limit our concerns only to the cares of this world.... We gradually realize what it means to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God....

Another crucial aspect of fasting emerges in Scripture in the answer Jesus gives to those who question why his disciples do not fast like those of John the Baptist and the Pharisees. Jesus says, The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? (Mk. 2:19). Theologians and New Testament scholars agree: Jesus' message is the primacy of love. The point is not that we as disciples are free to indulge, but that as Christians who experience the intimacy of wedding guests with a bridegroom, we demonstrate our love by sharing our table, as Jesus did, with the poor and unfortunate. Fasting never trumps love of neighbor.

There is some controversy surrounding the role of fasting in the years immediately following the resurrection and Pentecost. It is clear from several references in the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters of Paul that the disciples fasted and that the practice was connected in their minds with ministry and with the promptings of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, there is no mention of Jesus' example or of the motivation for fasting.

In the first and second generations after the Apostles, there is evidence that Christians linked fasting with prayer and almsgiving, that they may have understood fasting as imitative of Jesus' 40-day fast in the desert and also that the patristic writers were concerned about inner disposition why the people fasted as well as the bare fact that they fasted.

In the second through the fifth centuries, Clement of Rome, John Chrysostom, Peter Chrysologus, Jerome and Augustine, among others, preached on the subject of fasting and linked it with charity. In one of his homilies, Augustine asked and answered a perennial question: Do you wish your prayer to fly toward God? Give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving.

We find a touchstone of warmth and sanity in the *Rule* of St. Benedict. In the beginning of the sixth century, in a time of stern asceticism and political turmoil, Benedict remains a kind and generous observer of human weakness. He is reluctant to prescribe specific amounts of food and drink for individuals who have different needs, strengths and weaknesses. When it comes to Lent, he urges his followers toward self-denial, but always with a sense of humanity. The life of a monastic ought to be a continuous Lent, Chapter 49 begins. Since few, however, have the strength for this, we urge the entire community during these days of Lent to keep its manner of life most pure and to wash away in this holy season the negligences of other times.

Benedict then lays down some specific principles, without imposing regulations. During these days, therefore, we will add to the usual measure of our service something by way of private prayer and abstinence from food or drink, so that each of us will have something above the assigned measure to offer God of our own will with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

Joan Chittister, O.S.B., in her commentary on Chapter 49 in *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*, conveys Benedict's attitude in the language of our era and for an audience beyond monasteries: Lent is the time for trimming the soul and scraping the sludge off a life turned slipshod. Lent is about taking stock of time, even religious time. Lent is about exercising the control that enables us to say no to ourselves so that when life turns hard of its own accord we have the stamina to say yes to its twists and turns with faith and with hope.... Lent is the time to make new efforts to be what we say we want to be.

Benedict's message is that fasting and other Lenten practices are not a substitute for service to others; they are not a call to turn inward. And they are matters of individual choice and responsibility, not simply the response to a community requirement. Unfortunately, that was not the dominant message passed on through the ensuing centuries. From the Middle Ages to the 20th century, the Catholic practice of fasting was for the ordinary person both obligatory and highly regulated. The entry on fasting in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1913 gives numerous

guidelines for when the main meal should be eaten (at noon), how long an interruption may last (one-half hour, lest it become two meals), and the length of time the meal may last (two hours). There were similarly painstaking regulations on the amount and kinds of food allowed.

When I was growing up Catholic in New York in the 1950's, many of the regulations described in the encyclopedia were still intact. To fast and abstain on the days appointed was one of the commandments of the church, and Catholics obeyed. In most parishes, Lenten sermons simply rehearsed the rules. A sense of being Catholic, of corporate identity, emerges from shared stories of tuna casseroles, Mrs. Paul's Fish Sticks and snackless dates. But fasting and abstinence were hardly sources of spiritual sustenance and, for the majority of Catholics, had little connection with the Gospel. Penance was a way to subjugate an evil, concupiscent body a kind of spiritual gymnastics that many now find repugnant.

It was clearly time for a change, and in 1966 Paul VI, in the apostolic constitution *Paenitemini*, undertook to establish continuity in the tradition of fasting and also to explain necessary changes: Liturgical texts and writers of all ages clearly show the intimate bond between the external act of penance and the conversion of the soul to God, through the intercession of prayer and works of charity. The pope recommended that forms of fasting be appropriate to the economic conditions of the local churches. The Second Vatican Council had already delegated to national episcopal conferences the formation of any specific regulations on fasting and abstinence, and in the United States the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued its guidelines in *On Penance and Abstinence* on Nov. 18, 1966. Unfortunately, the only message that many Catholics heard was, No more rules.

In the United States there are now two obligatory days of fasting Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. The Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence: those observing the practice may not eat meat. Pastoral teachings since 1966 have urged voluntary fasting during Lent and voluntary abstinence on the other Fridays of the year. While fasting and abstinence still refer primarily to food and drink, modern interpretations also include other ways of following the discipline to fast from fighting, for instance, or anger or excessive shopping or television or alcohol.

Pastorally, there is now an emphasis on proper motivation an effort to move beyond the negative inheritance focused on guilt and sin and the idea of the body as evil. When the diocese of Saginaw, Mich., under the leadership of Bishop Kenneth Untener, selected fasting as its theme for Lent 1996, the teaching materials described fasting as a positive way to shake awake the spirit, to refocus priorities, to connect ourselves to Jesus, to recognize our hunger for God.

Contemporary insights from psychology offer us two additional ways to evaluate the practice of fasting. The first is the language of relationship how does fasting foster right relationships? In the concluding chapter of his book, Joseph Wimmer examines four relationships and the effect of fasting on each: our relationship toward ourselves, others, the world and God. By its first effect, he points out, fasting frees us from an over-concentration on self; it makes us more capable of responding to impulses of charity. By its second, Wimmer, using psychological terms, says that from the Synoptic Gospel writers we learn that fasting in the church would always be other-directed, that it would somehow be performed in the service of our neighbor, either directly, by giving to another the food or money saved by fasting or indirectly, and even more profoundly, by creating a bond of sympathy and understanding for those who hunger.... By the third our relationship with the world Wimmer says fasting acts as a corrective to the consumer mentality which looks on the universe as something to be exploited. Fasting... teaches us to use the earth's resources with care and respect. And finally, by the fourth, fasting puts us in a special way in the presence of God... It is an existential manifestation of our dependence on God. We fast in secret' uniquely in his presence; we do not measure ourselves with others... our fundamental relationship is with God.

A second contribution psychology brings to this discussion is the perspective gleaned from human experience and, more particularly, religious experience. If as Christians we believe that God is present in human experience, we must ask: is the experience of fasting graced by God? Does it involve us with the divine? Is it an encounter with the sacred? If not, shouldn't it be? Roger Repohl, writing in *Commonweal* (2/14/97), suggests that as a Catholic, he has

found fasting in the manner of Ramadan during Lent to be such an experience. It is... a turning away from self-obsession and toward total dependence on God. My own recent experience with Lenten fasting enhanced my prayer and affected me deeply; I would not hesitate to describe it as an encounter with the sacred.

There is a place for fasting in contemporary Catholic spirituality, but the practice must be based in love of God and love of all God's creatures. Following the catechesis in Matthew 6, it must be linked to prayer, by which we express love of God, and to almsgiving, by which we express love of neighbor. It must be rooted in an imitation of Jesus in the desert, in a personal acknowledgment of our hunger for God's word and in an awareness of our solidarity with those who hunger for bread. In the final analysis, fasting is not an end in itself, but a practice that enhances our love of God and of neighbor.



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