

Excerpt from Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion by Pope Benedict XVI

Do we not often take things too lightly today we receive the most Holy Sacrament? Could such a spiritual fasting not sometimes be useful, or even necessary, to renew and establish more deeply our relation to the Body of Christ?

In the early Church there was a most expressive exercise of this kind (of spiritual fasting): probably since the time of the apostles, eucharistic fasting on Good Friday was a part of the Church's spirituality of Communion. Not receiving Communion on one of the most holy days of the Church's year, which was celebrated with no Mass and without any Communion of the faithful, was a particularly profound way of sharing in the Passion of the Lord: the sorrowing of the bride from whom the bridegroom has been taken away (see MK 2:20). I think that a eucharistic fast of this kind, if it were deliberate and experienced as deprivation, could even today be properly significant, on certain occasions that would have to be carefully considered—such as days of penitence (and why not, for instance, on Good Friday once more?), or also perhaps especially at great public Masses when there are so many people that a dignified distribution of the Sacrament is often just not possible, so that by not receiving the Sacrament people could truly show more reverence and love than by doing so in a way that contradicts the sublime nature of this event.

Such fasting – which could not be allowed to become arbitrary, of course, but would have to be consonant with the spiritual guidance of the Church – could help people toward a deepening of their personal relation to the Lord in the Sacrament; it could be an act of solidarity with all those who have a yearning for the Sacrament but cannot receive it. It seems to me that the problem of people who have been divorced and remarried, yet equally the problem of intercommunion (in mixed marriage, for example), would be less of a burden if voluntary spiritual fasting was at the same time undertaken in visible recognition and expression of the fact that we are all dependent upon that “healing of love” which the Lord effected in the ultimate solitude of the Cross. I would not of course wish to suggest by this a return to some kind of Jansenism: in biological life, as in spiritual life, fasting presumes that eating is the normal thing to do. Yet from time to time we need a cure for falling into mere habit and its dullness. Sometimes we need to be hungry – need bodily and spiritual hunger – so as once more to comprehend the Lord's gifts and to understand the suffering of our brethren who are hungry. Spiritual hunger, like bodily hunger, can be a vehicle of love.

Pope Benedict XVI

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