



DOES FASTING HAVE ANYTHING to do with peacemaking?

It does if we consider what God intends for our fasting, at least as that's interpreted by Isaiah, clearly God's most trusted prophet. And if we relate that to St. Paul VI's most frequently quoted admonition.

First let's hear from Isaiah: In the reading proclaimed at Mass on the Friday after Ash Wednesday, a day upon which the Church calls upon all of us to fast from meat and opulent foods, God speaks of fasting, but a much different, seemingly far more consequential sort of fasting than we commonly imagine.

We read in Chapter 58 of Isaiah, "Is this the manner of fasting I wish, of keeping a day of penance: That a person bow their head like a reed and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?" And, a contemporary prophet might add: Is this a manner of fasting – to eat plates loaded with fried fish accompanied by glasses of beer? Do you call this a fast? The details aren't the same, but God is making the same point, more or less.

But God is just getting started. "This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry,

sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own."

Obviously, fasting from meat or chocolate or beer seems rather paltry, meaningless, compared to the fasting

call, and the Lord will answer." "Then you shall delight in the Lord."

Described in these early Lenten lessons on fasting are the ingredients of peace-making; the demanding, laborious, seemingly impossible endeavor that is pursued by those who hope to be among the blessed. This is the work of Christian charity, of feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless, but releasing bonds and breaking yokes also demands digging into the causes of such need, responding to the immediate plight while figuring out and resolving why that struggle exists. It's about identifying injustice, picking it apart and correcting it, and paving the road that leads to peace.

Which brings us to St. Paul VI, who was pope from 1963-78. In 1967 he designated Jan. 1 as a universal day of prayer for peace and in his 1972 message for that observance, Paul VI recalled it was Isaiah who not only linked fasting and justice, but took it one important step further: "Justice will bring about peace," we read in Isaiah Chapter 32. However, the Holy Father wanted to encourage that teaching in a more "incisive and dynamic" fashion. And so, he wrote, "If you want Peace, work for Justice."

And then, Paul VI might have added, you will be called children of God. **TL**



God describes through Isaiah, the fasting God seeks. This is a fasting that brings dignity to people burdened by injustices of race, of poverty, of whatever excludes and isolates, confines and condemns. This is fasting that warrants our personal assessment of how we add to that burden, even by our silence and indifference.

But, just wait, there's more.

In the passage proclaimed on Friday after Ash Wednesday, God and the prophet are just getting warmed up. Saturday's reading brings further meaning to the fasting God seeks: putting behind us anything that oppresses or hurts another, eliminating false or malicious speech, honoring the Lord's Day by putting aside our own desires and pursuits.

"Then your light shall break forth like the dawn." "Your vindication will go before you." "Then you shall