

THE PRACTICE OF FASTING

On Ash Wednesday, we began our season of Lent with a Gospel reading (Mt 6: 1-18) that spoke of the three great pillars of Lent: prayer, fasting and acts of charity. These, of course, are things that we should do as Christians all the time, but in Lent they take on a special focus and intensity. Perhaps of the three, fasting is the most puzzling: something that belongs to another age or spirituality, or that it is just a thing that a few people can do. Yet, fasting has a very long pedigree and it is very much part of our Christian tradition: it is mentioned many times in both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, fasting is also a common spiritual practice in many religions in the world. Perhaps three questions can help us to explore and to understand the meaning and the importance of fasting: *where* does this practice of fasting come from, *why* do we fast and *how* do we fast?

In the Old Testament, fasting was a common action both of individuals and of the whole community. Sometimes a fast was proclaimed as a sign of repentance (for example with the people of the city of Nineveh in the third chapter of the Book of Jonah), or as an invitation to renew and refocus their relationship with God (as in the First Reading for Ash Wednesday from the prophet Joel; Joel 2: 12). At other times, fasting was part of the preparation for a major task or project, especially a difficult one (Esther 4: 16), or as a form of clearing the mind and heart to receive a revelation or mission from God (for example, Daniel's vision in Daniel 10: 2-4, or in Exodus 34: 28 where Moses fasts before receiving the Ten Commandments).

Jesus himself fasted as we heard on the First Sunday in Lent (his temptations in the desert; Mt 4: 1-11) and at other times in his mission and ministry. The early Christians took up their Jewish inheritance and followed the example of the Lord by fasting. Perhaps they recalled the incident when Jesus' disciples were criticized for not fasting, whereas those of John the Baptist did (Mt 9: 15). They would remember well Jesus' reply: "can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them...when the bridegroom is taken from them; then they will fast." We hear of fasting in the Acts of the Apostles as a preparation for the celebration of the liturgy (Acts 13: 2), or for the strength to fulfill a mission, or as a form of prayer and supplication. St. Paul too frequently fasted and encouraged the practice of fasting (2 Cor. 6: 5, 11-27).

All these aspects of fasting have become part of our Christian tradition and they were formalized in the annual round of the Christian calendar. There used to be special fasts of three days every three months or so (called "Ember Days") and the season of Lent grew out of a three-week fast in preparation for Easter. A number of religious communities still keep various times and seasons of fasting. Today, we have just two official days of fasting: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, as well as the hour-long fast before receiving Holy Communion.

So, *why* fast? Hopefully, we have probably picked up many hints of this already from our exploration of where fasting has come from. Fasting above all is very much associated with our ongoing journey of conversion and our need for penance. As the Catechism (n. 1434)

summarizes, “fasting expresses conversion in relation to oneself, to God and to others.” Saint Augustine points out that fasting “purifies the soul, it lifts up the mind and it brings the body into subjection to the spirit. It makes the heart humble and contrite and enkindles the true light of charity.”

Pope Francis spoke about fasting in his Ash Wednesday homily this year: "Fasting makes sense if it really chips away at our security and, as a consequence, benefits someone else, if it helps us cultivate the style of the good Samaritan, who bent down to his brother in need and took care of him." Fasting, should "exercise the heart...it is a sign of becoming aware of and taking responsibility for injustice and oppression, especially of the poor and the least, and is a sign of the trust we place in God and his providence." In other words, fasting can help us to focus on those relationships with God, others and self, to remember that we ultimately depend on God and also to show solidarity with those who have to fast each and every day not by choice, but by necessity.

So, *how* do we fast? Well, we certainly need to do it in the right spirit. Jesus warns us not to go parading around the fact that we are fasting to impress others or to be noticed (cf. Mt 6:16). Also, if it makes us crabby or mean-spirited, then something is not right. I knew a priest who every Lent gave up alcohol and smoking....and everyone dreaded it. Even by the end of the first week of Lent, people (including the other priests who lived in the Rectory) were begging him to reverse his decision, as he was quite impossible to be around! As we have seen, fasting is meant to help, not hinder us in our relationship with God, others and our self.

We can fast from material things (food, alcohol etc.) as well as from things such as the TV, the computer, the smart phone or the x-box (now those are tough things to do!). We can then use the “space” created by that fasting to focus on those relationships. How about also fasting or abstaining from other things such as gossiping, anger, bitterness, negativity or selfishness? As one poem puts it:

Fast from discontent,
feast on gratitude.

Fast from complaining,
feast on appreciation.

Fast from bitterness,
feast on forgiveness.

Fast from self-concern,
feast on compassion for others.

Fast from suspicion,
feast on truth.

Fast from idle gossip,
feast on purposeful silence.

Fast from unrelenting pressures,
feast on unceasing prayer

May this Lent be a special time of growth for all of us: a time of prayer, acts of charity *and* of fasting!