

The Virtue of Fasting

“Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, ‘Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.’” (Mark 2:18-20)

“He ordered them to season with salt every sacrifice to God. With concern he reminded them that in offering sacrifice to God each one should consider his own strength. He insisted that it was just as much a sin to deprive the body without discernment of what it really needed as, prompted by gluttony, to offer it too much. And he added; “Dear Brothers, realize that, what I just did by eating was not my own choice, but an exception, demanded by fraternal charity. Let the charity, not the food, be an example for you, for the latter feeds the belly while the former feeds the spirit.”

(The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul, Thomas of Celano)

There was a time in the Church when fasting was prescribed more than it is today. Religious fasting has declined dramatically among Catholics and Christians. It has taken on a more secular meaning and is being promoted as a means of health and weight loss instead of being an act of humility before God in recognition of our need for conversion. Many feel that fasting needs to be reclaimed and “seasoned with salt” so as to rediscover again its proper purpose and perspective.

Long ago, the Desert Fathers/Mothers became convinced that the condition of the body reflected the condition of the soul. Body and soul have a reciprocal influence upon one another because they are both dimensions of a person’s identity. Throughout scripture we find that the work of achieving purity of heart and divine charity require self-mastery and self-control, because an undisciplined body reflected an undisciplined soul. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, there are three motives for fasting. First, fasting is the guardian of chastity as Paul teaches in 2 Cor 6:5. Second, fasting helps our minds rise more freely to the heights of contemplation as we see in Daniel 10:3. Lastly, fasting is a penitential sacrifice by which we can make satisfaction for sin as seen in Joel 2:12.

Within the Roman Catholic Church, there are two forms of fasting. Total fasting involves a complete renunciation of all food and drink and is of short duration. Its purpose is to produce a feeling of bodily hunger to help us uncover our deep spiritual hunger for God and is prescribed as a preparation for the reception of the Eucharist. The second type of fasting is partial fasting. It is penitential in nature and is practiced for an extended period since spiritual healing from the effects of our sinful lives require more time. It is also known as ascetical fasting and is a time where our hearts of stone are transformed into hearts of flesh. Typically, this form of fasting occurs during Lent when it is required to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Contemporary canon law requires taking no more than one full meal a day supplemented by two smaller meals or snacks which taken together are not to equal the size of one meal.

Our disposition and intention remains critical here. As St. Francis has said, “every sacrifice is to be seasoned with salt.” If our intention is to make ourselves more acceptable to God, then our hearts would be in the wrong place. The truth is that we are already acceptable and loved by God completely and totally. In contrast, if our motive is to love God, to open ourselves to Him more, and to make restitution for our sins or for those of others, then our heart is directed completely to God and we can be certain that we are fasting for the right reason. Nevertheless, it is always advisable to work with a spiritual director to ensure our motives are pure and true. For those whose health would be further impaired by fasting, there are a million ways to adopt an ascetical lifestyle. Maintaining silence when we wish to speak, governing our senses by critically examining the programs we watch or the books we read, limiting our time on the computer, social media, or our phones/tablet can become wonderful forms of sacrifice and penance.

Finally, not only is God present in our ascetical practices, but he is also present in our celebration and feasting. Sharing food and fellowship with others can bring us closer to God if they are engaged in thoughtfully in keeping with our dignity as his children. St. John Henry Newmann provides us with a balanced perspective in this matter:

“Let us first seek the Kingdom of God and His “righteousness” and then all things of the world “will be added to us”. They alone are truly able to enjoy this world who begin with the world unseen. They alone enjoy it, who have first abstained from it. They alone can truly feast, who have first fasted; they alone are able to use the world who have learned not to abuse it; they alone inherit it, who take it as a shadow of the world to come, and who for that world to come relinquish it.” (John Henry Newmann, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, pp 1234-35)

*As a member of the Secular Franciscan Order, penitential practices are a part of our charism. Read the Prologue to the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order. Are you living a penitential life or are there areas where conversion is needed?

*If you have not considered introducing fasting into your week, consider beginning slowly. Either begin one day a week with a partial fast or fast for a portion of the day. When you go to Mass, fast prior to receiving the Eucharist so that you can uncover your hunger for God.

*Try fasting the day before our Advent Day of Reflection so that you can fully appreciate the generosity of God and the members of your Franciscan community. Offer your fast for the Church and for its leaders that we may grow and remain faithful to the beautiful teachings left to us by Our Lord Jesus.