



On the Value and Meaning of Fasting

*He fasted for forty days and forty nights,
And afterwards he was hungry (Matt. 4:1,2)*

Pre-Lent 2022

To all clergy and members of The Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of the Southern Cross

Beloved in Christ,

As we approach the 10th anniversary of the creation of our Ordinariate, established under the 2009 Apostolic Constitution, *Anglicanorum coetibus*, perhaps we might look back to 2009 and listen to the words of Pope Benedict XVI in his Lenten message for that year:

"Dear Brothers and Sisters!

"At the beginning of Lent, which constitutes an itinerary of more intense spiritual training, the Liturgy sets before us again three penitential practices that are very dear to the biblical and Christian tradition - prayer, almsgiving, fasting - to prepare us to better celebrate Easter and thus experience God's power that, as we shall hear in the Paschal Vigil, 'putteth to flight the deeds of darkness, purgeth away sin: restoreth innocence to the fallen, and gladness to them that mourn: casteth out hatred, bringeth peace to all mankind, and boweth down princes.' For this year's Lenten Message, I wish to focus my reflections especially on the value and meaning of fasting. Indeed, Lent recalls the forty days of our Lord's fasting in the desert, which He undertook before entering into His public ministry. We read in the Gospel: 'Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry'. Like Moses, who fasted before receiving the tablets of the Law and Elijah's fast before meeting the Lord on Mount Horeb, Jesus, too, through prayer and fasting, prepared Himself for the mission that lay before Him, marked at the start by a serious battle with the tempter.

"We might wonder what value and meaning there is for us Christians in depriving ourselves of something that in itself is good and useful for our bodily sustenance. The Sacred Scriptures and the entire Christian tradition teach that fasting is a great help to avoid sin and all that leads to it. For this reason, the history of salvation is replete with occasions that invite fasting. In the very first pages of Sacred Scripture, the Lord commands man to abstain from partaking of the prohibited fruit: 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die'. Commenting on the divine injunction, St. Basil observes that 'fasting was ordained in Paradise', and 'the first commandment in this sense was delivered to Adam'. He thus concludes: ' "You shall not eat" is a law of fasting and abstinence'. Since all of us are weighed down by sin and its consequences, fasting is proposed to us as an instrument to restore friendship with God. Such was the case with Ezra, who, in preparation for the journey from exile back to the Promised Land, calls upon the assembled people to fast so that 'we might humble ourselves before our God'. The Almighty heard their prayer and assured

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them of His favour and protection. In the same way, the people of Nineveh, responding to Jonah's call to repentance, proclaimed a fast, as a sign of their sincerity, saying: 'Who knows, God may yet relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?' In this instance, too, God saw their works and spared them.

"In the New Testament, Jesus brings to light the profound motive for fasting, condemning the attitude of the Pharisees, who scrupulously observed the prescriptions of the law, but whose hearts were far from God. True fasting, as the divine Master repeats elsewhere, is rather to do the will of the Heavenly Father, who 'sees in secret, and will reward you'. He Himself sets the example, answering Satan, at the end of the forty days spent in the desert that 'man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'. The true fast is thus directed to eating the 'true food', which is to do the Father's will. If, therefore, Adam disobeyed the Lord's command 'of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat', the believer, through fasting, intends to submit himself humbly to God, trusting in His goodness and mercy.

"The practice of fasting is very present in the first Christian community. The Church Fathers, too, speak of the force of fasting to bridle sin, especially the lusts of the 'old Adam', and open in the heart of the believer a path to God. Moreover, fasting is a practice that is encountered frequently and recommended by the saints of every age. St. Peter Chrysologus writes: 'Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others, you open God's ear to yourself'.

"In our own day, fasting seems to have lost something of its spiritual meaning, and has taken on, in a culture characterised by the search for material well-being, a therapeutic value for the care of one's body. Fasting certainly bring benefits to physical wellbeing, but for believers, it is, in the first place, a 'therapy' to heal all that prevents them from conformity to the will of God... and thus assist us to mortify our egoism and open our heart to love of God and neighbour, the first and greatest Commandment of the new Law and compendium of the entire Gospel.

"The faithful practice of fasting contributes, moreover, to conferring unity to the whole person, body and soul, helping to avoid sin and grow in intimacy with the Lord. St. Augustine, who knew all too well his own negative impulses, defining them as 'twisted and tangled knottiness', writes: 'I will certainly impose privation, but it is so that he will forgive me, to be pleasing in his eyes, that I may enjoy his delightfulness'. Denying material food, which nourishes our body, nurtures an interior disposition to listen to Christ and be fed by His saving word. Through fasting and praying, we allow Him to come and satisfy the deepest hunger that we experience in the depths of our being: the hunger and thirst for God.

"At the same time, fasting is an aid to open our eyes to the situation in which so many of our brothers and sisters live. In his First Letter, St. John admonishes: 'If anyone has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him - how does the love of God abide in him?' Voluntary fasting enables us to grow in the spirit of the Good Samaritan, who bends low and goes to the help of his suffering brother. By freely embracing an act of self-denial for the sake of another, we make a statement that our brother or sister in need is not a stranger. It is precisely to

keep alive this welcoming and attentive attitude towards our brothers and sisters that I encourage the parishes and every other community to intensify in Lent the custom of private and communal fasts, joined to the reading of the Word of God, prayer and almsgiving. From the beginning, this has been the hallmark of the Christian community, in which special collections were taken up, the faithful being invited to give to the poor what had been set aside from their fast. This practice needs to be rediscovered and encouraged again in our day, especially during the liturgical season of Lent.

"From what I have said thus far, it seems abundantly clear that fasting represents an important ascetic practice, a spiritual arm to do battle against every possible disordered attachment to ourselves. Freely chosen detachment from the pleasure of food and other material goods helps the disciple of Christ to control the appetites of nature, weakened by original sin, whose negative effects impact the entire human person. Quite opportunely, an ancient hymn of the Lenten liturgy exhorts: 'More sparing therefore let us make / The words we speak, the food we take, / Our sleep and mirth, --and closer barr'd / Be ev'ry sense in holy guard.'

"Dear brothers and sisters, it is good to see how the ultimate goal of fasting is to help each one of us, as Servant of God Pope John Paul II wrote, to make the complete gift of self to God. May every family and Christian community use well this time of Lent, therefore, in order to cast aside all that distracts the spirit and grow in whatever nourishes the soul, moving it to love of God and neighbour. I am thinking especially of a greater commitment to prayer, 'lectio divina', recourse to the Sacrament of Confession and active participation in the Eucharist, especially the Holy Sunday Mass. With this interior disposition, let us enter the penitential spirit of Lent."



Grant, we beseech Thee, O Lord, unto Thy faithful people, that they may both enter upon the holy solemnities of the Lenten Fast with befitting reverence, and pass through them with peaceful devotion; through Christ our Lord. Amen.



A PRACTICAL NOTE

For reference, here are some practical comments on the actual practice of fasting and abstinence, and other acts of self-offering, out of love for the Passion of our Lord.

1. **Sunday**, the day of the Resurrection, is *never* a day of fast or abstinence.
2. **Abstinence** refers to *what* we eat and drink. Traditionally, the Friday abstinence applies to meat and fowl. In Lent this might also be extended to the Forty Days of Lent as well. For practical reasons, however, when we are not in charge of the menu (for example, when we are out to a meal) we shall eat what is put in front of us, and quietly abstain from something else on the table if we have a choice. We must make sure that our abstinence is a real act of self-denial, whatever form it takes. It must be done "to the Lord", not to be seen by others (*Matthew* 6:16-18). Our Lord had harsh words for people whose religious practices were performed in order to impress other people!
3. **Fasting** refers to a notable reduction in the *amount* of food we eat. The two are not mutually exclusive. To what extent we fast must be governed by considerations of age and health. We might say that only those in normal health between the ages of 18 and 59 inclusive should fast. Those who

should *not* fast are pregnant women, nursing mothers, those with stomach ailments, those doing heavy work, diabetics, etc.

The Two Fast Days. The Ash Wednesday and Good Friday Fasts (the only two fasts there are), traditionally involve eating only one meatless meal, and two light snacks if needed. Water and hot drinks are not considered as breaking the fast.

4. **Lenten Self-Discipline.** This should be *real*. There are habits, perhaps harmless in themselves, which often ‘control’ us, or are likely to do so. They should be under our control: for example, additional cups of tea or coffee throughout the day, the pre-dinner drink, snacking, and smoking. To limit such things during Lent might well do us a lot of good, both spiritually and physically. Almsgiving should be increased so that we give away any money saved by reducing self-indulgence.

We must remember that whatever form our fasting and abstinence takes, it must be *an act of devotion to our Lord*, if not, it is no different from secular ‘dieting’! Prayer, then, is the other side of the fasting and abstinence coin, and must accompany it. Offer the fast and abstinence, and the resulting discomfort, as a token proof, an acted prayer if you like, that you are serious in repenting of your sins both past and present. You might also use it for the sick, for the conversion of others, Church growth, to break a bad habit, for an end to abortion, etc. You could begin these Lenten days with some such prayer as this:



O dear Lord Jesus, bless this day of prayer and fasting which I offer in union with Thy fast and prayers for us to the Father. Accept it for (here mention the intention of the fast), and by Thy Holy Spirit sustain me this day. Amen.

Fraternally,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carl Reid".

Rev Mgr Carl Reid