

THE THREE PILLARS OF LENT, PART TWO:

THE PRACTICE OF FASTING

On Ash Wednesday we began our season of Lent, with a Gospel reading from the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6: 1-18). In that Gospel, Jesus spoke of the three great pillars of Lent: prayer, fasting and almsgiving/acts of charity. We saw, for example, how they are the perfect antidote to the three frequent temptations and corresponding vices that we often face, namely pleasure, possessions and pride. These three pillars are, 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. It can be perceived as belonging to another age or spirituality, or that it is just a thing only a few people can do. Thomas à Kempis, writing many centuries ago in his spiritual masterpiece, *The Imitation of Christ*, sadly commented: “Jesus finds many companions at table, but few in fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer something for him and with him.”

In fact, 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. Furthermore, fasting is also a common spiritual practice found 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 or frightening 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 hear, for example, in the Gospel for the First Sunday in Lent (during his temptations in the desert; Mt 4: 1-11). The early Christians took up their Jewish inheritance and followed the example of the Lord by fasting. Perhaps they recalled the incident when Jesus’ disciple 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 this is summed up in an ancient Lenten hymn, written by Pope St. Gregory the Great:

The glory of these forty days
We celebrate with songs of praise;
For Christ, by Whom all things were made,
Himself has fasted and has prayed.

Alone and fasting Moses saw
The loving God Who gave the law;
And to Elijah, fasting, came
The steeds and chariots of flame.

So Daniel trained his mystic sight,
Delivered from the lions' might;
And John, the Bridegroom's friend, became
The herald of Messiah's Name.

Then grant us, Lord, like them to be
Full oft in fast and prayer with Thee;
Our spirits strengthen with Thy grace,
And give us joy to see Thy face.

O Father, Son, and Spirit blest,
To thee be every prayer addressed,
Who art in threefold Name adored,
From age to age, the only Lord.

All these aspects of fasting have become part of our Catholic Christian tradition and they were formalized in the annual round of the liturgical calendar. There used to be special fasts of three days every three months (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: some of these fasts last many months! 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. In the USA, during Lent, we also abstain from meat on each Friday.

So, *why* should we fast? Hopefully, we have probably picked up many hints of the answer to this question 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 on a number of occasions: "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, he continued, "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." So, fasting can help us to focus on our relationships with God, others and self. It also reminds us that we ultimately depend on God. It can be a living sign of our 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 (as is also the case with abstinence). 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). Furthermore, if it makes us crabby or mean-spirited, then something is not right. I knew a priest who every Lent “fasted”, that is 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, too much social media, or computer games (now those are tough things to do!). We can then use the “space” created by that fasting to focus on those relationships with God, self and neighbor. 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, almsgiving/acts of charity,
and of fasting and abstinence!

Very Rev. Anthony M. Barratt, STL, PhD, KCHS, ChM