

2011 Lenten Reflections

A Reflection on the Third Week of Lent

Every Lent the church reiterates a three-fold call to her members during the observance of this sacred season. We are called to prayer, fasting and almsgiving. For this week's reflection, we will examine the call to fasting.

It is important to note that fasting has long been a part of most major world religions, especially in connection with holy seasons and sacred feasts. Such practices are characterized primarily by abstaining from some, or all, physical sustenance. However, even in the Jewish Scriptures we learn that mere physical fasting is not all that God desires.

In Chapter 58 of the prophet Isaiah we read: "Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your home; when you see the naked to cover them, and not hide your face from your own? If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom will be like the noonday."

We will return to a further exploration of "non-physical" fasting, but first it is important to note that the Christian practice of the Lenten fast has changed significantly over the centuries. In the early church, fasting developed in connection with the catechumens preparing for Baptism at Easter. Initially, Lent was a period marked by fasting, but not necessarily every day. The early Christian community observed a strict fast from Good Friday to Easter. In the centuries that followed, fasting and abstinence practices went through many variations. Today the church mandates fasting and abstinence only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. The Fridays of Lent are observed as days of abstinence from eating meat. Not a huge burden or a great sacrifice!

Having noted these external food-related fastings, let us shift our focus back to some of the internal behaviors noted in the previous passage from Isaiah. Engaging in practices that are born from a sense of justice and care for our sisters and brothers, and abstaining from behaviors that demean or ignore others, may cost us more than "giving up" meat for a few days. What does God desire us to "fast from" this Lent that will help transform us into a closer likeness to Jesus?

Perhaps we could consider some of the following:

- Fasting from judging others; focusing on the Christ within us.
- Fasting from anger; focusing on forgiveness.
- Fasting from pessimism; focusing on optimism.
- Fasting from worry; focusing on trust in God.
- Fasting from complaining; focusing on appreciation.
- Fasting from selfishness; focusing on compassion for others.
- Fasting from discouragement; focusing on hope.
- Fasting from thoughts of illness; focusing on the healing power of God.

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One final consideration... in our acquisitive, pleasure-oriented society, fasting is a way of keeping ourselves free.

Consider some questions that could help you on your own personal, spiritual journey:

- How much is “enough” for me?
- How much is “too much”?
- How much is “not enough” for my sisters and brothers?
- Am I focused on what I *need*, or simply on what I *want*?
- How can I share my “surplus” gifts or possessions with those who are in need?

This Lent, recognizing the hold that “things” can have on us, let us try, with God’s help, to keep them in their right place.