

Thoughts on Christian Fasting

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A Long History

From the beginning, even before sin, God called humanity to fast. It began in asking Adam & Eve not to partake of the forbidden fruit. Because of this, and because of the subsequent failure of Adam & Eve to fulfill their fast, the Church has always emphasized the vital importance of the practice of fasting.

“Because we did not fast, we fell from paradise. Let us fast, therefore, that we may return to it.” (St. Basil the Great)

“Just as Adam was driven out of paradise for having eaten, refusing to trust, so it is by fasting and faith that they who wish to enter paradise do so.” (St. Athanasius)

“Adam broke the fast by eating the forbidden fruit. Christ the new Adam begins His redemptive work by fasting and restores man to paradise, to true life. Christ... fasted in the desert to triumph over the harmful effects of Adam’s greed.” (Sr. Mary David Totah)

A High View of the Body

Does fasting suggest a negative view of the body and/or of materiality (food, wine, etc.)? Definitely not.

“Christians do not practice asceticism (of which fasting is one form) because they think things in the world are corrupted, but because human beings are corrupted in spirit, and only by a properly ordered use of the world -- that is, by sacramentally directing matter to a spiritual end -- can the world become an encounter with the anticipated Kingdom... Asceticism is not a reproach of the body, it is a response to love, and the first responsive act is to turn one’s face unflinchingly against anything that would disorient this love... Bodies are good. Senses are good. Matter is good. Asceticism has nothing to do with dualism... It is a moral act to renounce something if it is bad, but it is an ascetical act to renounce something even if it is good... Morality urges renunciation of those things injurious to a person, such as if an alcoholic gives up wine, but an ascetic does not give up wine for the moral reason that he thinks wine is bad... The ascetic...knows that the interior discipline is done by means of exterior things.” (David Fagerberg)

The Purpose of Fasting

What does fasting accomplish? Fasting is a conscious disciplining of our bodily appetites in order that we might orient ourselves body, soul, mind, and spirit toward Christ.

“Fasting signifies a radical change in our relation to God and the world. God, not the self, becomes the center, and the world is seen as His creation, not something that exists for our own gratification... Our fasting orients us towards Christ’s second coming, just as the Eucharistic fast orients us towards receiving Him at Mass. The fasting is ultimately for the feasting.” (Sr. Mary David Totah)

“Fasting is the champion of every virtue, the beginning of the struggle, the crown of the abstinent, the beauty of sanctity, the resplendence of chastity, the commencement of the path of Christianity, the mother of prayer, the well-spring of sobriety and prudence, the teacher of stillness, and the precursor of all good works.” (St. Isaac the Syrian)

“By its beauty, fasting etches the image of eternal life into the body; the practice suggests the condition of the new age; it teaches us what spiritual food we shall receive at the resurrection.” (Martyrius Sahdona, 7th cent.)

Fasting in reference to Christ

Famously, Jesus exempted His disciples from the customary fasts of the time, receiving criticism from the Pharisees for doing so. Jesus' reason: the disciples were in the presence of the "bridegroom".

"Mentioned in all three synoptic Gospels, this word of Jesus puts fasting in explicit relation to himself. The interruption of the fast is a sign of Christ's presence; fasting is connected with his absence. Thus it is a law of the church that no one fasts on the days when we especially celebrate Christ risen and newly present among us, whether it be the weekly Sunday or the fifty days of Paschaltide (Eastertide). That is why, too, the early monks broke their fast in the presence of guests in whom they saw the person of Christ." (Sr. Mary David Totah)

Jesus anticipated that His disciples would fast after he left them to ascend to the Father. He presumed it would be a regular part of their lives:

"The days will come when the Bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days" (Luke 5:35).

"And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:16-18)

The Practice of Fasting (and Feasting)

Fasting works most effectively when practiced in a rhythm with feasting. The Didache (1st Century Christian teaching) prescribes fasting twice a week, Wednesday and Friday, while Sunday is always a feast day set aside to celebrate the resurrection. This has been the typical weekly rhythm for Christians for 2,000 years. In addition to this there are seasons of fasting (Advent and Lent) and feasting (Nativity and Eastertide) prescribed throughout the Christian year. There is power in fasting and feasting together.

"The exercise of self-restraint, which some decided for themselves by their own judgment, pertains to the benefit of certain individuals; but a fast undertaken by the whole Church leaves no one out from the general purification. It is then that the people of God become powerful, when the hearts of all the faithful come together in the unity of holy obedience, because in the camp of the Christian fighters, there is a similar preparation all around, and the fortification is the same everywhere." (St. Leo the Great, 10th century)

What does it mean to fast?

Varieties of Fasting: The Church, in many cases, has distinguished several variations in what it calls the faithful to do in fasting.

- *Abstinence* refers to abstaining from certain foods - typically meat, dairy, eggs, and alcohol (or just meat in some cases). This is the traditional Lenten fast.
- *Fasting* can also refer to a *partial fast* - eating a reduced quantity of food in a day (example: one small meal) or a *complete fast* from all food. Traditionally Ash Wednesday and Good Friday were the days in the year set aside for a complete fast while all other fast days were days of abstinence or partial fasting.
- *Eucharistic Fast* is the traditional practice of fasting from food for 3 hours prior to receiving Holy Communion, which can be traced back to the Council of Hippo in 393AD (though Augustine and others suggest this practice goes back to the Apostolic age). More recently some church bodies have reduced this fast to one hour before Communion.

What is God inviting you to do?

All Christians are encouraged to participate in the rhythms of fasting and feasting provided by the Church calendar (weekly & seasonal) while prayerfully discerning any additional special fasts for personal reasons.