



First Sunday of Lent March 13, 2011 A

FASTING—AN IMPORTANT SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

In this Sunday's Gospel, we find Jesus out in the desert fasting, praying, and resisting the temptations of the devil.

I have never been much of a "faster." But this Lent I have decided to give up desserts, something I have tried to do in the past and failed miserably. This year I am hoping, with the grace of God, to be more successful.

Fasting—a way to tackle our addictive nature head-on

All of us, I assume, are addicted to something—that which we find very hard to do without daily. For me, it's dessert. Also, I would find it very hard to go a day without reading and looking at some television. Others are addicted to caffeine, technological devices, alcohol, pornography, shopping, criticizing others. Lent gives us a wonderful opportunity to tackle our addictions, to see how difficult it would be to live without that something we really like and have an *inordinate* attachment to. We could even journal what goes on within us as we seek to fast from our addictions. I intend to do that with desserts. Why do I think I must have that dessert? What makes it so hard to come off it? What can motivate me to stay the course and fast from my inordinate dependence on dessert? What can I learn about my addictive nature as I battle my desire for dessert?

St. Thomas Aquinas and fasting

Frankly, I don't know why anyone should listen to Aquinas on this issue. He was built like Pope John XXIII. It was even said that a part of his dinner table had to be cut out so that his tummy would fit in. Having said that, Aquinas offers us the following three reasons why we should fast:

· Fasting is a way to curb our inordinate pleasures. We might say fasting is to the body what prayer is to the soul.

· Fasting is a way to do penance for past sins. We might say fasting puts some beef into our "I'm sorry, God, for my past misuse of your gifts, for my past excesses."

· Fasting is a way to foster a close relationship with the Lord. I can't speak on this very much since I have always been such a lousy "faster." But ever since Jesus spent forty days out in the desert in fasting and prayer, this spiritual discipline has been seen as one way to get closer to God.

Fasting and social charity

When it comes to this aspect of fasting, Isaiah 58:1-9 is the Scripture's most frequently quoted. In that text, Isaiah says that the fasting that pleases God the most is the one that leads us to "share our bread with the hungry and give shelter to the homeless."

Fasting during Lent or any other time of the year should help to connect us, even in some small way, with those who, on a daily basis, have a fast forced upon them due to lack of food. In his book, *The Spirituality of Fasting*, Fr. Charles Murphy writes:

The federal food stamp program helps feed twenty-six million persons in the United States who do not earn enough to feed themselves. During the deliberations in Congress in 2007 about this program, one representative decided to try to live for just one week on the three dollars a day a typical food stamp recipient is given by the government. His wife joined him in an effort to gain people's attention and raise their awareness about the existence of hunger in this most prosperous nation. During these seven days the representative lost three pounds. The last night before the experiment, the couple dined on steaks, asparagus, tomatoes, and a bottle of pinot noir. The next morning their breakfast consisted of a banana accompanied by water from the tap, but no coffee—coffee was too expensive. Pasta, rice, and frozen vegetables got them through the week. Their conclusion was that no one should be forced to live on such meager rations. America in this regard is far better off than such regions as sub-Saharan Africa where thirty-three million children under five years old are starving and face stunted futures if they survive at all.

Catholic social teaching is based upon the principles of justice, the common good, and solidarity with others, especially the most vulnerable. It requires modifications

in how we live our lives, particularly in our eating habits. Solidarity is that form of social charity and friendship with others that forces us to reevaluate how we eat. Self-centered, mindless consumption of the earth's scarce goods in disregard of others' needs may be described as a social sin.

The practice of the virtue of solidarity frees us from the consumer mentality according to which everything is just a commodity, something to be consumed. (p.71)

“This kind of spirit can only be driven out through prayer and fasting.” (Mk 9:28-29)

In Mark's Gospel, we are told of a man who brings his possessed boy to Jesus for healing. The father of the boy explains that he has brought the boy to Jesus' disciples, but they are unable to heal him even though they have healed many others with similar afflictions. When Jesus arrives at the scene, he rebukes the unclean spirit, ordering it to come out of the boy, and the child is cured. The disciples are confused as to why they are not able to cast out the demon. So when the crowd has dispersed and they are alone with Jesus, “his disciples ask him in private, ‘Why was it that we could not cast it out?’ And he tells them, *‘This kind of spirit can only be cast out through prayer and fasting.’*”

In his book *Rediscover Catholicism*, popular writer and speaker Matthew Kelly says that the above story on the spiritual exercise of fasting has been most important to him. He writes:

In my own life, I have known the demon of habitual sin. When I first turned to God in my late teen years, I was possessed by such a demon. I tried with all my might to wrestle with it, but nothing worked. I prayed, begging God to free me from this sin, but he didn't. I employed all the power of my will, but that didn't work either. Then one day I noticed the previous passage in Mark's Gospel and at that moment I felt the hand of God upon my shoulder. Encouraged by the example of a friend, several weeks later I began to fast each Friday, eating only bread and drinking only water. I offered this fasting to God, asking him to liberate me, and it was then that God cast the demon of habitual sin from my life. I believe with my whole being that some demons in our lives “can only be cast out through prayer and fasting.” (Mk 9:29). If you are suffering under the slavery of ingrained bad habits, turn to God through prayer and fasting. If you are being tormented by the demons of habitual sin, turn to God through prayer and fasting.

It is important to note how different the reasons for fasting are from the reasons for dieting. Fasting is by its very nature a statement of humility, while dieting is usually linked to ego, vanity, and pride. It is also

interesting to realize that the secular culture takes all things sacred and waters them down, ridicules them by adopting the opposite extreme, or separates them from their true meaning and purpose. Dieting is the secularization of the great spiritual exercise of fasting. But dieting is devoid of the strongest motives and reasons: repentance, self-denial, humility, self-mastery, and the spiritual power that comes from these dispositions.

You are a delicate composition of body and soul. Fasting is to the body what prayer is to the soul. Indeed, fasting is the prayer of the body, and bodily fasting leads to spiritual fasting.” (pp 255-256)

Pope Benedict says that “fasting (when spiritually motivated) nurtures an interior disposition to listen to Christ and be fed by his saving word. When we fast we are naturally led to prayer, which satisfies the deepest hunger that we experience in the depths of our being, the hunger and thirst for God.”

St. Augustine writes: **“Do you wish your prayer to fly toward God? Give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving.”** If we are dealing with an addiction that we want to get cured of, the Lenten tripod of prayer, fasting and almsgiving will surely help to drive out the demon that wields control over that area of our life.

Matthew Kelly recommends that we make small forms of fasting a part of our daily lives. By passing up a coke or cigarette that we crave, we say no to the cravings of the body that seek to control us and assert the dominance of the soul. The will is strengthened and the soul is a little freer and we create one ounce of self-possession. Kelly urges us to “*never leave a meal table without practicing some form of fasting. It is these tiny acts that harness the body as a worthy servant and strengthen the will for the great moments of decision that are part of each of our lives*” (p.260).

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Aaron