

Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



“Intentional Fasting”

Fasting! For many, it’s a “dirty word!” People don’t like to hear it, let alone to do it! Some Catholics consider fasting a vestige of the past, which has lost any relevance today. Others, when Lent comes along, treat fasting more as an obligation to fulfill than as an opportunity for spiritual growth. But to what kind of fasting are we called?

The Bible is full of examples of fasting, from the exhortations and witness of the Old Testament prophets to the New Testament exhortation and witness of Jesus which we heard on Ash Wednesday. Jesus himself fasted for forty days in the desert. And from the beginning, the Church has taught and encouraged the need for asceticism, that bodily self-denial and self-restraint which most often takes the form of fasting, especially in Lent.

The Church’s program of Lenten fasting and abstinence is clear: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are obligatory days of fasting and abstinence for Catholics. In addition, Fridays during Lent are obligatory days of abstinence. For members of the Latin Catholic Church, the norms on fasting are obligatory from age 18 until age 59. Of course, as even the saints attest, those whose

health might be compromised by fasting should follow the path of prudence and common sense. When fasting, a person is permitted to eat one full meal, as well as two smaller meals that together are not equal to a full meal. The norms concerning abstinence from meat are binding upon members of the Latin Catholic Church from age 14 onwards. This is the basic obligation.

Truth be told, many folks have admitted to me that the sum of their understanding of fasting was simply this: you fasted to suffer. Many were taught that fasting was taking on a “suffering” so as to unite one’s suffering with the Lord who suffered and died for us. Now there is no doubt that their fasting done in good will was in itself spiritually fruitful. There is no doubt that if I’ve given up chocolate each Lent since 6th grade or alcohol each Lent as an adult, that there were spiritual benefits. Such fasting may however fall into the trap of “fasting for fasting’s sake.” Such fasting might not bear the greater spiritual fruit the Lord might have in mind for our fasting. So how do we deepen our fasting?

This Lent, I recommend the method of fasting taught to me by my spiritual director years ago, which might serve to advance our understanding

of and increase the spiritual fruit from our fasting: "Intentional Fasting." When I fast, I prayerfully and thoughtfully offer the fast for a particular purpose. The intention may be for my own spiritual well-being or directed to the good of others. The result of such fasting can be transformative!

If I am doing some bodily fasting, I do it with a clear intention in mind, bring that intention to prayer, and I pray for that intention while I am fasting. Fasting becomes intentional. How often I've offered some fasting as a penance in confession, suggesting to penitents that as they fast, they intentionally beg: "Lord, as I deny myself this food, comfort or bodily pleasure, so give me the grace to deny myself this temptation, this sinful behavior." I can't tell you the number of folks who have told me that such fasting has changed their spiritual lives!

A young man fasted and abstained from going to his girlfriend's house when her parents were not home, with the intention that they cease having sexual relations there. That fasting and abstinence served practically to remove the near occasion of sin and brought chastity to their relationship. A seminarian fasted one Lent from all bread, with the intention that he grow in deeper love for the Holy Eucharist. He credits that Lent with a more profound Eucharistic piety today! A religious sister one Lent intentionally fasted with the sincere hope to refrain from gossip to which she was prone. Afterward, the sisters in her community recognized her as one of the most charitable sisters in their convent!

A wife whose husband was suffering greatly from cancer took on intentional fasting for the sake of comfort and grace for her spouse of 45 years, who was unable to fast or pray himself. He died a peaceful and serene death. A husband and father caught in the addiction of pornography fasted intentionally from the internet by unplugging and removing his computer from his home. His actions saved his marriage and increased his love for his wife and children. A mother frustrated by the

manner in which she treated one of her unruly children did intentional fasting for patience. After Lent, she found she was able to treat that child in a more loving way. A supervisor in the work place offered an intentional fast to make the most prudent decision of which newer employee he had to terminate due to cost cuts. When he chose who it would be, he learned that the person had in fact already been offered another higher paying job!

In Preface IV for the Season of Lent from the Roman Missal, we pray: "For through bodily fasting you restrain our faults, raise up our minds, and bestow both virtue and its rewards."

Notice that in the Gospel of Matthew we heard on Ash Wednesday, we don't hear Jesus say: "If you give alms...If you pray...If you fast." No, Jesus said to his disciples and says to us: "When you give alms...When you pray...When you fast!" These three characteristics of authentic Christian life go together. They are the threefold effort we include every time we pray our Diocesan Prayer: "by our prayer, fasting and almsgiving..." These three are interrelated and interdependent. If our Lenten practice, indeed our Christian lives, are deprived of any one of these, our spiritual life will be less than it could be. Thus, fasting is an integral part of our Catholic lives, not just during Lent.

This Lent, I invite you to reexamine your own Lenten practice of fasting and to begin or to enhance your "Intentional Fasting"! While for some fasting is a "dirty word," that "dirty word" can help cleanse us from sin and temptation, love and serve our neighbor more, be a source of repentance, conversion and an opportunity for spiritual growth for us and for those for whom we fast! A Blessed Lent!



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