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## Christian Fasting

*Fasting, like prayer, demonstrates the essential duality that qualifies the Christian life. Both of these religious practices operate at two levels: the personal and the corporate, and together they are linked inseparably. At the personal level, fasting and prayer are actions enjoined by Our Lord to be carried out 'in secret', in seclusion or in solitude.*

### INTRODUCTION: PRAYER AND FASTING

"But thou when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly [...] but thou when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly." (Matthew 6,17-18).

Here we see an intimate encounter of persons with the Living God where there are neither witnesses nor a communal participation: 'enter thy closet ... shut thy door ...' And yet, paradoxically, even in this retirement or seclusion, in the solitude of one's closet, one fasts and prays as a member of the redeemed Community: the Church of Christ. Comprehensiveness in fasting and prayer is the mark of spiritual health and maturity. In their compass and content, Christian fasting and prayer can never be strictly "private", although it must always be personal. Christians should be fully aware of the ultimate ground of their privilege to fast and to pray – it is precisely their membership in the Community, in the Church of Christ.

At the fully corporate level, the faithful are advised to pray together for certain things in common: "for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18,20). Here the ultimate mystery of worship is manifested, for the "gathering" in the name of Christ is itself a gift of the Spirit. It also presupposes a kind of spiritual preparation and training. The analogy with fasting can be seen in the regulations for abstinence prescribed by the Church

for the entire worshipping community. Whereas the fast in secret, normally known as the *ascetic fast*, has its own rule and rhythm, according to differing traditions and circumstances, and is essentially an *abstinence* (the avoidance of particular foods at certain periods of the year or on certain days of the week), the fast of the *ekklesia* is total (no food or liquid intake) and is in effect a preparation for the Eucharist banquet, which is a type of the heavenly kingdom.

The divine injunction to fast is as ancient as humanity itself. "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2,16-17). Original sin is revealed to us by the breaking of a fast by Adam in Eden. Succumbing to temptation and eating the forbidden fruit, he was expelled from Paradise and made subject to death. The New Adam of Gospels, on the other hand, begins with fasting (Matthew 4,1-11). In overcoming the temptation to eat, Christ destroyed death and opened once more the gates of Paradise. From either perspective, the Biblical view of fasting is of something vital (in the literal sense of 'life-giving') and of decisive importance. The abstinence of the first Adam may be considered ascetical since its obvious purpose was to lead the moral head of the human race to recognize the necessary dependence of creature upon Creator. The total fast of Christ in the wilderness was undertaken as the immediate preparation for his public ministry: to lead humanity back to the Kingdom of God.

### FASTING IN ANTIQUITY

The practice of keeping a fast in ancient times was prevalent among the Greeks and the Israelites. The practice in antiquity did not seem to have an ethical dimension. Rather, it was primarily associated with rites of mourning. In ancient Greece its main purpose seemed to be an apotropaic one; the mourning fast was seen as a powerful medium of warding off demonic spirits that could enter the body through eating and drinking. For the Israelites, between the time of death and the burial, mourners were required to abstain from all flesh and wine. Fasting was also considered by the Greeks to be a means of expiation and purification that rendered the faster fit for union with the deities. In the



Elysian mysteries fasting was obligatory for the newly-initiated in order to render them worthy of receiving the sacramental drink. Another context in which abstinence from food was required in antiquity was that of manticism. It was believed that the one who fasted was more receptive to divine revelation. Thus, preparation by austere fasting was a necessary precondition for the dream oracles through which the gods unveiled the future to their devotees and made promises to them.

The notion of fasting (as opposed to the keeping of dietary laws) in preparation for a theophany is also known in the Old Testament: Moses, on the mountain, fasted for forty days and forty nights (Exodus 24,18), while the Israelites below were instructed also to abstain from sexual activity (Exodus 19,15), and Daniel fasted as he awaited God's answer to his prayer (Daniel 9,3). There are many instances of fasting as an act of national penitence. After the disaster of the Civil War, Benjamin the whole nation fasted (Judges 20,26) and Samuel made the people fast because they had strayed away after Baal (1Samuel 7,6). Nehemiah also made the people fast and confess their sins (Nehemiah 9,1).

### FASTING IN EARLY CHRISTIAN TIMES

Some of these early characteristics of fasting recur in early Christianity, but in general, the position adopted towards fasting was different and exceptional. Jesus had criticised the ritual formalism of the Pharisees because it assumed precedence over ethical action. However, he did not eliminate fasting for he spent forty days in the desert praying and fasting and he suggested that both could be used as effective means against the devil, a view which is reminiscent of ancient practices. Yet, because of the association of fasting with mourning, Jesus regarded fasting in his Messianic presence as meaningless:

“And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they came and say unto him, ‘Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?’ And Jesus said unto them, ‘Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.’” (Mark 2,18–20).

In primitive Christianity, therefore, the perception of fasting differed considerably from contemporary Jewish attitudes. The dietary regulations of the Mosaic Law were also abandoned and as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century, for the followers of Jesus and of his disciples did not observe any voluntary fasts.

Fasting at that period was connected, as in antiquity, specifically with preparation and expectation. Jesus had instructed his Apostles to wait for the Holy Spirit Who would guide them in their decision making (John 14,26). After the Resurrection and the Ascension, fasting would assume an eschatological dimension, the expectation of the Parousia.

In the post-apostolic period, however, Christianity imposed its own rules with regard to fasting, which seem to have developed from Jewish ones. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the Easter fast was established. The duration of this fast was analogous to the period of time that Christ spent in the tomb. However, it was *not* associated with mourning, but rather was viewed as a preparatory period for the celebration that lasted from Easter to Pentecost and as an outward sign of the anticipation of spiritual fulfilment. During the course of the 4<sup>th</sup> century this fasting period was extended to forty days in commemoration of the forty years spent by the children of Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 16,35) and Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness, tempted by the devil (Matthew 4,1); from then onwards it was known as the Great Fast (Lent).

By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Wednesdays and Fridays were designated as fasting days for Christians. These days were chosen because they were days of mourning: Wednesday in remembrance of the betrayal of Jesus and Friday in remembrance of his death. To fast on Saturday, the day that the Lord rested from his work of Creation, and on Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection, was prohibited since fasting and joy were regarded as antithetical.

### THE LITURGICAL DIMENSION OF FASTING

The collective fast of the Church, the Body of Christ, presupposes a dimension that is essentially *liturgical*. It is an act of unification and time-reckoning. It unites the soul with the body, the one who fasts with the divine, and also all believers in the world in a shared action. Yesterday and tomorrow become ever-present in this time scale for through liturgical fasting and feasting, the faithful are given the opportunity to be actually present as contemporaries at the cardinal moments of salvation history. Liturgical life and everyday life are not separate compartments in the life of a Christian. Liturgy is life and all of life is liturgical, and this includes the fasting of the assembly.

Fasting is also an expression of how we use our human liberty of choice. It teaches us how to become free. Indeed, the right use of freedom has to be learnt – a process that



involves obedience, discipline and self-denial. "I will not offer to the Lord my God that which has cost me nothing" (2Samuel 24,24). Freedom is not only a gift; it is also a task – the refusal to accept the desires and urges of our fallen nature as normal, the effort to free ourselves from the dictatorship of flesh and matter over the spirit. Through fasting we can discover that we do not live by "bread alone".

Ascetic, or personal abstinence is also an act of restoration and reconciliation. Seen from this perspective it is not a measure of sacrifice as such since the emphasis is not primarily a matter of giving up but of *giving*. Our concern is not about what we deny ourselves, but upon what we offer to God and to our neighbours. And the effect of our making a gift to God – a gift which God then accepts – is to re-establish the personal relationship between ourselves and God. This is precisely the aim of fasting that is offered: to restore communion. In both the Scripture readings and the hymns during Lent, there is a clear and unmistakable order of priorities. Persons come first, rules of fasting come afterwards. Our abstinence will be worse than useless if it does not bring us closer to our fellow humans. A fast without love is the fast of the demons. "What is the use of our abstinence", protests Saint Basil the Great (d. 379), "if instead of eating meat we devour our brother or sister through cruel gossip?" God is interested not in one's diet but in one's personal relationship with other persons.

#### FASTING AND RELATIONSHIPS

Thus it becomes evident that fasting, which is often regarded as the chief feature of Lent, is not an end but a means. Fasting is valueless if it does not bring about a restoration of relationships. In fact in the Gospels, Jesus does not simply speak of fasting alone but often employs the pairing "prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17,21; Mark 9,29). If we fast, it is in order to render ourselves more apt for prayer, that is to say, in order to bring us back into relationship with God. While the true practice of fasting may indeed involve sacrifice and self-denial, this is not to be construed exclusively in negative terms. Its purpose is most definitely positive: not to chastise the body, but to render it spiritual; not to fill us with weariness and self-disgust, but to break down our sinful sense of self-sufficiency and to make us conscious of our dependence upon God. Fasting is certainly an ascetic undertaking, but its effect is to bring about a sense of lightness and freedom, of wakefulness and hope. "Thus says the Lord of Hosts: the fast [...] shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts" (Zechariah 8,19).

Fasting not only re-establishes our relationship with God and with our neighbour, it operates more widely by restoring our affiliation with the material creation: first of all, with our own physical bodies, and then with the world of nature – with the animals and the plants, with earth, air fire and water – with which our bodies bring us into contact. We are enjoined to fast not because there is something shameful about enjoying one's food. By the same token, when married couples are encouraged to abstain from sexual relations at certain seasons of the year, this is not a debasement of sexuality. Such conclusions are erroneous and deeply harmful, for "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was altogether good and beautiful" (Genesis 1:31). Our bod-

ies, as created by God, are essentially good; food and drink are God's gifts, as is sexuality. All material things are potentially a sacrament of God's presence, a means of communion with God.

#### WHY FAST?

Why, then, is it required of us to fast and abstain? Precisely because our human attitude towards the divine creation has been distorted by sin – both by the original sin that we inherit and by the sin that we each individually commit. Fasting and abstinence correct the distortion in our relationship with the material world, purifying us from the effects of sinfulness, and restoring our primal vision of the created order. Asceticism is in this way not a negation but a vindication of the innate holiness of all material things. Properly understood, fasting and other ascetic endeavours are battles not against but for the body. We do not repress the body but transfigure it and reaffirm its materiality, rendering that materiality spiritual. Rather than repudiating the legitimate pleasure taken in eating and in marital relations, fasting assists us in liberating ourselves from greed and lust, so that both these things become not a means of private pleasure but an expression of interpersonal communion. So long as we are dominated by greed and lust, then in our relationship to material things we are profoundly unfree and depersonalised. Once we cease to see material things as objects and regard them as means of personal communion, once we stop grasping them compulsively and begin to offer them back to God in thanksgiving, then we become free and personal once more.

Having recovered, therefore, through prayer and fasting, a proper attitude to our bodies, by extension we also recover a right attitude to the creation as a whole. We are helped to value each thing for its self – not just for the way in which it serves our own ends – and at the same time we are helped to see the divine presence at the heart of each thing. Thus the true aim of fasting is to render the creation personal and transparent, so that we regain our sense of wonder before the sacredness of the earth. It assists us to see all things in God and God in all things.

Fasting, so far from being world-denying, is in reality intensely world-affirming. This is a fallen world, full of the ugliness and pollution caused by human sin and selfishness. But it is also God's world, a world full of beauty and wonder, marked everywhere with the signature of the Creator, and this we can discover through a true observance of fasting.

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