

Fasting and Abstinence during Lent

In his recent homily for Lent, Pope Leo XIV reminds us that Lent is an invitation “to put the mystery of God back in the centre of our lives.” This means that we need to learn afresh to hear and listen to the Word of God. In this respect, fasting plays a central role in enabling us to listen to God on a profoundly spiritual level. The Holy Father says:

‘If Lent is a time for listening, *fasting* is a concrete way to prepare ourselves to receive the word of God. Abstaining from food is an ancient ascetic practice that is essential on the path of conversion. Precisely because it involves the body, fasting makes it easier to recognize what we “hunger” for and what we deem necessary for our sustenance. Moreover, it helps us to identify and order our “appetites,” keeping our hunger and thirst for justice alive and freeing us from complacency.’

During Lent, the question of fasting and abstinence comes into focus. The Catholic Bishops of England and Wales remind us that Fridays are days of penance throughout the year. Abstinence from meat is to be observed on all Fridays (unless a Solemnity falls on a Friday).

Fasting and abstinence are required on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. It is important to note that fasting in Scripture and in Christianity is always in relation to food and almsgiving, and it is not to be confused with other practices.

- **Abstinence** binds Catholics from the age of 14 (no meat, that is, the flesh of warm-blooded animals).
- **Fasting** binds those aged 18 to 59 (No meat – one full meal and two smaller meals which together do not equal a second full meal, with no food between meals).
- In addition, there is no consumption of food for one hour before Mass throughout the year.

Those who are sick, elderly, pregnant, nursing mothers, or otherwise unable to fast are excused – health comes first.

The Gospel reading of the First Sunday of Lent reminds us that fasting is the spiritual setting for the season of Lent. Indeed, many of the liturgical prayers throughout the season assume that, in keeping with the spirit of the season, we are observing a holy fast. While fasting beyond the days required by the Church is **not an obligation, nor is it a sin**, it remains a beautiful and time-honoured practice that Lent warmly commends to us. **In voluntarily embracing even a simple fast**, we follow the loving example of Christ, who fasted for forty days in the desert, and we allow our hearts to be drawn closer to His.

Of course, our fast is not meant to be as strict as that of Christ; we can simply follow the discipline prescribed by the Church. For example, we may have a small meat-free breakfast, a small meat-free lunch, and a full meat-free dinner, punctuated by prayer and divine works. If not the forty days of Lent, then perhaps a few days of each week of Lent.

Fasting stretches the heart. It creates room for prayer. It deepens our compassion for those who hunger daily, not by choice but by circumstance. Indeed, in a profound sense, fasting is our way of entering into Christ’s journey through the desert, walking with Him to the Cross in anticipation of the joyful Paschal Feast of Easter. *So let us run, as St Basil the Great says,*

‘...to greet the cheerful gift of fast. Fasting is an ancient gift, but it is not worn out and antiquated. Rather, it is continually made new, and still is coming into bloom.’

Extracts from the Homilies of St Basil of Caesarea, *On Fasting and Feasting* (4th Century)

'Fasting is an opportunity for a good cheer. After all, just as thirst makes drinking pleasurable, and hunger before a meal makes eating it pleasurable, so too fasting enhances the enjoyment of food when it is partaken.'

"Anoint your head, and wash your face." The word calls to you in a mystery. What is anointed is christened; what is washed is cleansed. Transfer this divine law to your inner life. Thoroughly wash the soul of sins. Anoint your head with a holy oil, so that you may be a partaker of Christ, and then go forth to the fast.'

"Don't darken your face like the hypocrites." A face is darkened when the inner disposition is feigned, arranged to obscure it to the outside, like a curtain conceals what is false.

Who makes his own house decline by fasting? Count the domestic benefits by considering the following things. No one has been deserted by those in the house on account of fasting. There's no crying over the death of an animal, certainly no blood. Certainly nothing is missed by not bringing an unmerciful stomach out against the creatures.

Even those who exact tribute sometimes give a little liberty to their subjects. The stomach should also give a vacation to the mouth! It should make a truce, a peace offering with us... That stomach never stops demanding, and what it takes in today is forgotten tomorrow. Whenever it is filled, it philosophizes about abstinence; whenever it is emptied, it forgets those opinions.

While getting filled up does a favour for the stomach, fasting returns benefits to the soul. Be encouraged, because the doctor has given you a powerful remedy for sin. Strong, powerful medicines can get rid of annoying worms that are living in the bowels of children. Fasting is like that, as it cuts down to the depths, venturing into the soul to kill sin. It is truly fitting to call it by this honourable name of medicine.

'True fasting is being a stranger to vice, controlling the tongue, abstaining from anger, distancing oneself from lust, evil speech, lying, perjury. The absence of these vices makes fasting true, and so shunning these vices makes fasting good.'

Fasting sends prayers up to heaven, as if it were its wings for the upward journey. Fasting is the expansion of the household, the mother of health, the pedagogue of youth, the adornment of seniors, a good companion on journeys, and a safe housemate for married couples.