

FASTING

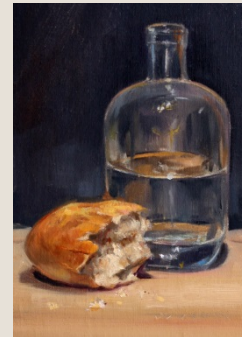
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Foundress

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The message of repentance and conversion is always directed first to our hearts: "Rend your hearts and not your garments," the prophet Joel says to us (Joel 2:12-18). This is the passage of Scriptures that we hear in the first reading of Ash Wednesday.

"As we see in the prophets, the call of Jesus to conversion and to penance does not attend primarily to exterior acts, 'to sackcloth and ashes,' to fasting and mortifications, but to the conversion of heart, to inner penance. Without it, the works of penance remain sterile and deceiving; on the contrary, interior conversion inspires one to the expression of this attitude by means of visible signs, gestures and works of penance." (Catechism 1430)



Conversion is the change of heart. If this change is authentic, it ought to manifest itself in all areas of our lives since it is the heart that moves our decisions, actions, sentiments and dispositions. The heart is the interior throne of the human person. All interior reality must necessarily manifest itself in the exterior. God revealed His love for us by sending His only Son in the mystery of the Incarnation. "The Word became flesh." (John 1:14) This is how our lives must be: conversion must have a concrete expression that is incarnated in each area of our lives. Conversion is not only about saying, "Lord, Lord," but to say that our entire lives, minds, hearts, talents, gifts, capacities and body belong to the Lord and for His glory. Sincere conversion is to change the interests of our hearts—it is to no longer live for our own desires, which is contrary to the Gospel: "Who ever wants to follow me, let him deny himself." (Luke 9:23)

We are created with a body and a soul. The necessary purification of our interior for the conversion of our hearts must also necessarily take place in our bodies, senses, thoughts, actions, and habits. Interior penance, the tearing of the heart, must have external expressions and therefore lead us to a growth in grace in all of our being. All things must be integrated and ordered by grace with our cooperation through prayer and penance.

The Church teaches us that there are three traditional expressions of penance. These are **fasting, prayer and almsgiving**. These three are mentioned by Jesus in the Gospel of St. Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-18; precisely in the Gospel of Ash Wednesday.

Fasting, prayer and almsgiving remind us that conversion includes all of the aspects of our life: "they express conversion in relation to ourselves, to God and to others." (CCC 1434)

In this conference I want to dedicate myself specifically to fasting, which is so necessary in order to grow in self-control, in moderation of our appetites and in opening ourselves to the spiritual realities and to eternal nourishment.

WHAT IS FASTING?

It is the practice of limiting the amount of food and water we receive in order to imitate the sufferings of Christ during His Passion and throughout His earthly life. Fasting reminds us that conversion affects, and ought to affect, all areas of our lives.

FASTING AS A PART OF THE JEWISH TRADITION

Leviticus 16: 29-30... The Lord orders a day of fasting as expiation and purification: ("you will fast... for in that day there will be expiation done you in order to purify you.")

Joel 2:12... as a sign of repentance: ("turn to me with your whole heart, with fasting, with tears and with laments.")

Exodus 34:28... as a preparation for the manifestations which are to come, Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai without eating bread or drinking water and after this wrote the new Tablets of the Law

Deuteronomy 10:10... intercessory power ("I remained on the Mountain as the first time, for 40 days and 40 nights, in fasting. This time Yahweh listened to me and turned away from destroy you.")

Jonah 3:7... in the face of the future destruction of Nineveh, the people did fasting and penance.

Psalms 35:13... faced with an unjust persecution, David fasts and does penance.

Psalms 109:24... in order to receive the help of the Lord, fasts until he is weak in the knees.

Judith 4:9-15... Before the threats of Nebuchadnezzar, the Israelites offer praises, prayers, penance and fasting. The Lord heard their voices and saw their anguish.

Esther 4:16... Esther tells Mordecai: "Go and unite all the Jews that are in Susa and fast for me. Do not eat nor drink anything during three days and nights. My servant and I will also fast. And in this manner, regardless of the law, I will present myself before the King; if I have to die, I will die." (Esther is about to go before the

king in defense of her people who were condemned to death. She is going to unmask the enemy. It almost seems as the petition of the Virgin of Fatima, who appears with a star on her mantle. Esther means "star")

FASTING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew 4; Luke 4... We see Jesus in the desert praying without eating or drinking anything for 40 days.

Mark 9:29... "This kind of devil can only be cast out by prayer and fasting."

Luke 2: 37... "Ana did not leave the Temple, serving God with fasting and prayer."

Acts 13:3... "The community, after having prayed and fasted, laid hands on them and sent them off."

Acts 14:23... "Presbyters were chosen in each church, and after fasting and praying, they entrusted them to the Lord."

Col. 3:3... "I rejoice in my sufferings, which I carry for you, thus completing in my flesh what is lacking in the tribulations of Christ, in favor of His Body, which is the Church."

1 Cor. 9:25... "athletes deprive themselves of all things and this for a corruptible crown, we, however, for one that is incorruptible."

Gal. 5:17... "for the flesh has desires contrary to the spirit and the spirit contrary to the flesh, as if they were antagonistic, in such a way that you do not do what you want."

THE TEMPTATIONS IN THE DESERT

An important passage for us to meditate upon is Matthew 4, the temptations in the desert. Within it we find many teachings that are necessary for the spiritual life. I will concentrate on those which I think demonstrate the importance of fasting.

Jesus receives Baptism and the Holy Spirit descends upon Him, and a voice is heard which says, "This is my well beloved Son." (All of this is a beautiful and very spiritual experience.) Immediately, that same Spirit takes Him to the desert (a solitary place, dry, dangerous and without any provisions at all), to be tempted by the devil. The desert is necessary so that the Lord can do great things in us. He has always revealed Himself to His people in an extraordinary way during times of being in the desert and He has always prepared His people for mission during the times of being in the desert. But precisely because of this, the devil also wages a great battle in the desert in order to place obstacles to what God wants to do.

Jesus prepares Himself for this battle with prayer and fasting of 40 days and nights. How do we prepare ourselves for the battle that our lives wage in the contemporary world? We prepare ourselves with prayer and fasting. When we feel greater temptations, we must pray and fast more.

The Israelites are freed from Egypt and are taken to the desert towards the Promised Land. After just a short time after leaving Egypt and of walking through the desert, their resources were depleting. Then, they began to rebel against Moses and their first complaint was about being hungry and thirsty, demanding that he provide for them. The Lord works the miracle of the manna, and of having water come out from the rock when Moses struck it with his staff.

Jesus fasts and with His fasts, He makes reparation for the complaints and injuries of the Israelites which were done in the desert against God.

First temptation: Jesus feels hunger (a human reality) and here the devil takes advantage in order to throw out his first temptation and seduction: "If you are the Son of God, make these rocks into bread." Jesus replies: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." (Deut. 8:3)

The devil is not able to make Jesus fall even though He was hungry, because, through His fasting, He had placed His need to satisfy His hunger, His physical gratification, in second place. Through fasting, we dominate this area so that when the temptation comes to us, we can resist it.

Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the God." Jesus responds making reference to Deut 8. This is a characteristic of Christ, to show us that to fulfill the will of God gives greater life than that which we can receive by eating. This response of Christ reveals to us what those 40 days were: there was no bread or water, but there was a profound communication with the Father. This is more important than anything else: not to seek our food outside of the will of God. This means that we should not satisfy the appetites of our body, emotions, sexuality, mind, ego, fame, recognition, etc. outside His will.

Second temptation (because He feels hunger): "He is taken to the pinnacle of the temple and is told: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written: your angels will come to your rescue, they will carry you in their hands so that your foot will not stumble upon any stone." Jesus tells him: "it is also written, you shall not tempt the Lord your God." (Deut. 6:16)

The devil is tempting Jesus to dishonor the Father's protection and to take control of things outside of obedience to God. It was the temptation of personal satisfaction of being served by the angels, of being

protected by them so that nothing would happen to Him. Jesus is tempted in this area after having fasted; could this be because fasting has the power to free us from our egos? To free us from our desire to be served and honored?

Third Temptation: (because He feels hunger): "He is taken to a very high mountain and is shown all the kingdoms of the world and is told: I will give you all of this if you prostrate yourself before me in adoration." Jesus responded: get away from me, Satan, for it is written: the Lord your God you will adore and give worship to." (Deut 6:13) The devil tempts Him with earthly power and fame. Could it be that fasting liberates us from these desires? Could it be that when we experience our weakness, emptiness, and need that in fasting we recognize that we are creatures, dependent on God, and thus we are freed from the great temptation to adore false gods (including ourselves)?

The three temptations in the desert were directed towards pleasure, power and fame. The three were presented during the 40 days of prayer and fasting. The three were overcome with the contrary virtues: denial, total submission to God and His Word, and humility—three virtues that are the fruit of fasting.

The Old Testament reveals to us the power of fasting over our external enemies; the New Testament also reveals to us the power it has to overcome the enemies of our soul: the flesh, the devil and the world.

FRUITS OF FASTING:

Fasting is not an end in itself, but a means to conversion. It brings us to conversion by conducting us to liberty of mind and heart. It is a process through which we are freed from the earthly attachments and to all those things that keep us bound: willfulness, desires, excessive self-preservation, and it leads us to peace. Fasting strengthens and stabilizes us and helps us develop self-control (one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit). At the same time, it helps us to recognize our weakness and dependence on God and helps us grow in poverty of spirit. It edifies our interior life by eliminating the excesses in our life in order to make more room for God.

Fasting leads us more readily towards a life of inner union with God and with the heavenly world; fasting frees us from the burdens and attachments of material things. The saints recommend fasting to all those who desire to achieve greater interiority. Fasting debilitates little by little, our concupiscence.

FASTING AND THE WORD OF GOD

Matthew 4:4: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

John 4:32: "My food is to do the will of the One who has sent me and to fulfill His work."

The day of fasting ought to be a day of profound prayer, meditation on the Scriptures and on the Magisterium of the Church, enriching our minds by finding our food, our satisfaction, in the truth. We ought to permit our souls to be filled with the Word that is life, that frees us and that elevates us and teaches us to think, feel and to act according to the will of God. On the days of fasting, I have found, for some reason, that it is easier to penetrate into the Scriptures, to meditate on them and to capture more profoundly the message that is hidden behind its words. Through fasting, we give priority to the soul.

FASTING AND THE EUCHARIST

John 6:27: "Work not for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

The physical emptiness that we experience in fasting helps us to become more aware of our interior emptiness and our need for spiritual realities. In a preeminent manner, the day of fasting ought to be a Eucharistic day: adoration, reparation, etc.

Some choose to fast on bread and water most commonly on Wednesdays and/or Fridays. Bread is the food of the poor. The disposition to live on bread and water for a day demonstrates the good will one has to be poor before God and well-disposed to His will.

Bread and water: two important symbols in the Scriptures

Bread, in Sacred Scripture, symbolizes life and nourishment. (Bread, food - Eucharist) Water, another preeminent symbol in Scripture, often has the connotation of purification as we see in the water that flows from His pierced Heart which symbolizes Baptism. Additionally, two miracles that the Lord worked with the Israelites while they were in the desert are centered on these elements of bread and water.

Seek true life by means of purification. Fasting on bread and water is a call to grow in dependence on the Eucharist. It is also a call to enter into a life of purification, of conversion, of stripping ourselves of all that separates us from the Lord or does not allow us to be His adoptive sons, nor His image and likeness.

John 6:34: "I am the bread of life, he who comes to me will not hunger, he who believes in me will not thirst."

WE HAVE HEARD THE BLESSED VIRGIN CALL US TO FASTING:

We hear repeated messages from Our Lady of Medjugorje regarding fasting:

"Your fasting has the power to prevent wars and natural catastrophes."

"Practice fasting because with fasting you will obtain the complete realization of the plan that God has. With this you will make me most happy."

"I invite you to prayer and fasting. With your help I can do all things and oblige Satan to no longer instigate souls."

"Pray and fast, only in this manner you will be able to know what is evil within you and to offer it to God with the hope that He will purify your hearts of all things."

Mark 9:29: "That kind of devil can only be cast out with prayer and fasting."

His Holiness John Paul II on the need to fast to weaken the "spirit of death and the culture of death"

"I repeat what I said to those families who carry out their challenging mission amid so many difficulties: a great prayer for life is urgently needed, a prayer which will rise up throughout the world. Through special initiatives and in daily prayer, may an impassioned plea rise to God, the Creator and lover of life, from every Christian community, from every group and association, from every family and from the heart of every believer. Jesus himself has shown us by his own example that prayer and fasting are the first and most effective weapons against the forces of evil (cf. Mt 4:1-11). As he taught his disciples, some demons cannot be driven out except in this way (cf. Mk 9:29). Let us therefore discover anew the humility and the courage to pray and fast so that power from on high will break down the walls of lies and deceit: the walls which conceal from the sight of so many of our brothers and sisters the evil of practices and laws which are hostile to life. May this same power turn their hearts to resolutions and goals inspired by the civilization of life and love." (Evangelium Vitae, n. 100)

FASTING APPEASES GLUTTONY

With fasting we learn to dominate ourselves and to free ourselves from the sin of gluttony, which does not only manifest itself in the excessive eating, but also in more refined and spiritual forms.

1. **Intellectual gluttony:** uncontrolled desire in the areas of knowledge (curiosity) of science. This is very dangerous because it was the first sin of Eve, curiosity. From here comes the occult, psychics, astrology, the reading of palms, etc... a desire to know the future.
2. **Spiritual gluttony:** seeking sentiments that come from pious reading and sensible pleasures—not wanting to miss out on any spiritual experience.
3. **Gluttony of pleasure, honor or fame:** one does anything in order to have attention, to be recognized, etc.

TO FAST NOT ONLY FROM FOOD

Saint John Chrysostom:

"The value of fasting consists not only on avoiding certain foods, but of renouncing to all attitudes, thoughts and sinful desires. Whoever limits fasting simply to food is minimizing the great value that fasting has. If you fast, prove it in your actions! If you see a brother in need, have compassion on him. If you see a brother receiving recognition, do not envy him. For fasting to be true, it cannot be so only in our mouths, it must be a fasting of our eyes, ears, feet, hands... of all our bodies, interior and exterior.

Fast with your hands by keeping them pure in the disinterested service of others. Fast in your feet by not being slow in love and service. Fast with your eyes by not seeing impure things or by not looking at others to criticize them. Fast of all that puts your soul or your holiness in danger. It will be useless to deny my body food while I am feeding my heart with waste, with impurity, with selfishness, with competitions, with comfort.

You fast of food, but you allow yourself to hear vain and worldly things. You ought to also fast with your ears. You ought to fast from hearing things that are said about your brothers, lies that are said about others, especially gossip, rumors, cold words that are hurtful and against others.

You also ought to fast with your mouth; you ought to fast from saying anything bad about others. For of what value is it for you to not eat if you devour your brother?" (From homily On Fasting)

What does St. John Chrysostom want to tell us with this reflection?

That the days of fasting ought to be special days of abstaining from all disordered and exaggerated use of our senses. (To not look at what I should not, to not speak what I should not, to not hear what I should not, to not desire what I should not, to not seek satisfaction of my emotional or spiritual needs; to not seek to fill my loneliness by immediately seeking companionship; to not want to know everything; to not seek immediate answers to all that comes into my mind, etc.)

We fast seeking conversion. Therefore, we must fast of all of these attitudes that are contrary to virtue. Perhaps your fasting will be about being more serviceable (to fast from sloth, from comfort). For just as the Blessed Virgin Mary asks us to pray with the heart, we need to fast with our hearts. Maybe we need to fast from our anger by being more amiable, sweeter and more docile on the days we fast. Maybe I have to fast

from pride by actively seeking to be humbled and by doing concrete acts of humility, etc.

FASTING AND BODILY PURITY

Let us listen to Cardinal Ratzinger:

“To fast means to accept an essential aspect of the Christian life. It is necessary to discover again the corporal aspect of our faith: the refraining from eating is one of those aspects. Sexuality and nourishment are two central elements of the physical dimension of man: today, a greater lack of understanding of virginity corresponds to a greater lack of understanding of fasting. And one and the other lack of understanding proceed from the same root: the actual darkening of the eschatological tension, which is to say, of the tension of the Christian faith towards eternal life. To be virgin and to know how to periodically fast is to testify that eternal life awaits us; even more, that it is already within us. Without virginity and without fasting, the Church is not Church; it loses its transcendentalness, and submerges itself in history.

“Today more than ever, penance and mortification are necessary in order to expiate our sins and to repair for those of the whole world. Through the years, humanity has always been sinful, but it recognized it and would do penance for this. Today this is not so; one lives in sin and does not call it sin, but rather is proud of it. All moral and ethical principals are being rejected and for this reason humanity has lost its interior liberty and has become a victim of the worst dictators: oneself and the devil.

“It seems to me that fasting, as a common and public act of the Church, is as necessary today as it was yesterday; it is a public witness both of the primacy of God and of spiritual values such as solidarity with all those who go hungry. If we do not fast we will not be able to free ourselves of certain devils of our times.” (The Ratzinger Report, pp. 113-114)

For this reason the Catechism of the Catholic Church, says: “The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. (2 Tim. 4) Spiritual progress entails the asceticism and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes. (CCC 2015)

Fasting and charity

Fasting cannot be separated from fraternal charity. If a Christian would deny himself all things, it is in order to give it to his brothers and be, therefore, a testimony of his love for God.

Pius XII (1950): “let people devote to charity what they withdraw from vanities, and mercifully meet the needs of the Church and of her poor.”(as cited in Fidei Donum, n. 61)”

Saint Augustine: “your denials will be fruitful if you demonstrate patience with others.” (cf. Lenten Sermons) Privations are Christian if they make us grow in holiness, in charity and generosity.

In the first Christian communities whenever there was a poor person among them who needed to be helped, they would fast for two or three days, accustomed to send him nourishments that they had prepared for themselves.” The primitive Church observed two days of fasting during the week: Wednesdays and Fridays.

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