

Encouragement Encouragement

March 2015 Issue 44

Fasting: Useful or Useless...

The Host Apostolate
www.thehostapostolate.org
14, Goatbeck Terrace,
Langley Moor,
County Durham,
DH7 8JJ
United Kingdom

'When you fast do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do; they pull long faces to let men know that they are fasting. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that no one will know that you are fasting except your Father who sees all things done in secret, will reward you.'

Notice that Jesus did not say 'if' but 'when' you are fasting. In more recent times fasting has become less frequent and less understood. It is seen as something old fashioned and not required for holiness. It is often substituted for phrases such as 'doing something positive' instead of self-denial or 'doing without' which has negative connotations and rather useless. Of course there is a vitally important aspect to alms giving and indeed it can be a consequence of fasting, such as the popular family fast days in Lent. To deny oneself and give the proceeds to those who have little to eat is surely the duty of all of us.

But is that all there is to fasting- has it no worth of its own? In this present world of 'must haves' and self-satisfaction the idea of doing without is seen as almost evil or something to be surmounted. People are encouraged to work long hours and for longer years to ensure earthly treasures which in the end neither satisfy nor please or do so temporarily, only to be replaced by another fad of advertising manipulation. Yet Jesus not only encouraged fasting but bid us to smile through it and rejoice. Did He Himself not go into the desert and fast amid wild animals before he entered into the life of mission, His Mission of spreading the Gospel. Did not St. John the Baptist do the same? Have not many great saints spent time in solitude and fasting in preparation for a mission or an apostolate. There are of course saints 'hermits' for whom it became a way of life. Solitude or withdrawing from earthly pleasures 'go hand in hand' with fasting as it is a way of self-denial and discipline, again words not popular today.

Jesus who clearly was hungry was tempted by satan to convert stones to bread- instead of doing without. He showed us the imperative of doing without in order to

focus, or rather *refocus* on what is important. Jesus was tempted (but resisted) as we are frequently, to choose the path of self-satisfaction rather than the path of 'otherness', of doing what is good for others rather than ourselves. If we constantly please our own selves and fulfil our own desires we become selfish and greedy wanting more and more. It is interesting that fasting requires us to have less, not nothing, so that we become aware of what we are doing. This is often done by people without thinking of it as fasting but it surely is. What mother would feed herself if her children were hungry? How many times do parents make sacrifices and resist little treats and put money by for their children's genuine needs. Jesus himself recognised this selflessness when he spoke of a father not giving his children a scorpion rather than bread if they asked for it. Another example of this awareness is 'the last piece on the plate' being offered to a guest as a matter of politeness and generosity but it is also fasting or self-denial.

So we are asked to take less, to become aware of the needs of others but also to refocus ourselves on the important things such as generosity and kindness as well as prudence and discipline. In some people the need to eat to excess, as we see today, becomes an obsession. This also applies to those who drink to excess, the so called 'binge drinking', take drugs to excess or even clothes or trinkets (I am not speaking of true addiction here which is a serious illness and malady). Denying ourselves that which of itself is good in most cases makes us think whether that object of our desire is really worth having and essential. A curious discovery too, in the medical field, has pointed to the reality that abstaining from food for a while can actually improve health.. It has become evident that even with dieting, a day off from usual food intake, can produce good effects. It is also important to remember that for many people with health problems some foods that other people take for granted can lead to serious illness such as those with diabetes or who suffer from allergies or have certain deficiencies. Fasting ourselves should surely remind us to pray for people in this situation and remember that for some,

"Surrender of self applies as much to the daily affairs of life as it does to affairs of the soul. They cannot be separated. We are all of one piece."
Brother Roger of Taizé

fasting/abstaining, is an essential part of life. What we take for granted others cannot do.

And so we turn to prayer. Jesus pointed out that there were certain demons that could only be cast out by fasting and prayer. The Apostles could not understand why they failed in this task and Jesus rebuked them by reminding them of this fact. Fasting purifies our intentions. When we fast we recall how blessed we are to have anything at all and how we should not presume on having all we want as opposed to what we need. Our Heavenly Father provides for all our needs. In reality we need very little to survive and live well. We also live happily if we please others and serve others rather than ourselves.

A spiritual desert dweller withdraws from the ordinary to find what God is asking of him or her. 'Poustinia', an eastern European word for a wilderness is often a way of spending time alone with God with maybe just a loaf of bread and water or tea. This sometimes is only for a '24 hour' period. This can lead to a reevaluation of what is important. Many retreat houses and monasteries have such a room put by for just such a purpose. Seminarians, in preparation for Ordination often spend a period in silence, maybe eight to ten days, to prepare to receive this sacrament of service. In many cases this encounter with Jesus in Presence and Word leads them to realise something of the nature of God, his love and their own shortcomings. It can lead us to a greater understanding and awareness of our own sins and failings too. We are asked to enter into that silent space during Lent. We cannot all go away but we can set time apart to pray and reflect. We are asked to fast formally only twice a year on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. We are encouraged to do without some meal do give aid to those in need on other Fridays in Lent.

There have been those who have been called to live solely on the Eucharist, something that many today would find impossible to believe but has been scrutinised very thoroughly by the Church and number among the Blessed of our times. Such as these are very rare but can be named. There is Blessed Alexandrina Da Costa, Ven. Marthe Robin, both having lived the twentieth century. Clearly these are exceptional occurrences but underpin a great truth that we are fed in mind and body and soul by the Eucharist and by the Word of God. Jesus, when tempted by Satan, rebuked him with the words 'man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the 'Mouth of God'.

Please feel free to copy and distribute unaltered

If we take this seriously then fasting, refraining from food, and reflecting on what we have been taught in Scripture about the nature of being a Christian should bring us great joy and consolation. We become realigned and put on the right road that leads to love of God and neighbour surely a good aspiration for all of us in Lent.

Halina Holman

Stones into Bread

The Fountain thirsts, the Bread is hungry here
The Light is dark, the Word without a voice.
When darkness speaks it seems so light and clear.
Now He must dare, with us, to make a choice.
In a distended belly's cruel curve
He feels the famine of the ones who lose
He starves for those whom we have forced to starve
He chooses now for those who cannot choose.
He is the staff and sustenance of life
He lives for all from one Sustaining Word
His love still breaks and pierces like a knife
The stony ground of hearts that never shared,
God gives through Him what satan never could;
The broken bread that is our only food.

Malcolm Guite



Pope Francis ...On fasting

Pope Francis has asked us to reconsider the heart of this activity this Lenten season. Fasting must never become superficial. John Chrysostom said: "No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. But this isn't to downplay the role of sacrifice during the Lenten

season. Lent is a good time for penance and self-denial. But once again, I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt. So, if we're going to fast from anything this Lent, I suggest we fast from indifference towards others. Describing this phenomenon he calls it the *globalization of indifference* "whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard; the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt. But when we fast from this indifference, we can begin to feast on love. In fact, Lent is the perfect time to learn how to love again. Jesus—the great protagonist of this holy season—certainly showed us the way. In him, God descends all the way down to bring everyone up. In his life and his ministry, no one is excluded. What are you giving up for Lent? If you want to change your body, perhaps alcohol and candy is the way to go. But if you want to change your heart, a harder fast is needed. This narrow road is gritty, but it isn't sterile. It will make room in ourselves to experience a love that can make us whole and set us free. Now that's something worth fasting for.

Rome, Lent 2015

**Feasts in March: 7th St Perpetua and Felicity,
10th St John Ogilvie, 17th St Patrick,
19th St Joseph, 25th The Annunciation,
29th Palm Sunday...
6th Women's World Day of Prayer**