

# The Psychology of Fasting

## *THE FACTS*

Fasting was an essential aspect of primitive Christianity, as it had been in Old Testament times. Given that this is the year of Saint Paul, I may note that he fasted between his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, and his baptism and again when he was chosen as the Apostle to the Gentiles:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”<sup>1</sup>

That the followers of Jesus would fast is taken for granted. Consider, e.g., this famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount:

When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.<sup>2</sup>

There is no need, of course, to remind you of the fact that Jesus fasted for forty days on the eve of his public ministry, as we heard in last Sunday’s Gospel. In doing so Jesus echoed the fasts of the great saints of Old Testament time: Moses on Mount Sinai, Elijah in the wilderness. The most dramatic instance of the benefits of fasting is surely that reported in the book of Jonah:

Jonah cried, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. . . . When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 13.2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 6.16-18.

<sup>3</sup> Jonah 3.4-5, 10.

*WHY FAST*

When we examine the various instances of fasting in the Scripture we find that the overall motive is to facilitate making contact with God: one must turn away from worldly things, one must achieve a certain distance from mundane concerns, in order to encounter God. As an immediate corollary of this fact we see that fasting is particularly appropriate for repentant sinners, such as those Ninevites, or the Psalmist:

O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from thee. . . . I humbled my soul with fasting.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus confirmed this power of the fasting in any encounter with evil when he said of a possessed person: “This kind [of demon] can be driven out only by prayer and fasting.”<sup>5</sup>

*THE EARLY CHURCH*

It is no surprise, therefore, to learn that fasting was essential in the practice of the early Church. Consider, for example, the *Didache*, an ancient handbook of Christian living that is as old as the New Testament, if not older. In chapter 7 it speaks of baptism in the following way:

And concerning baptism. . . . before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whoever else can; but you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.

Two points are worthy of consideration here: the first is the obvious one that fasting was appropriate for the man who was going to encounter God in the sacrament; the second is that everyone joins in the fast as a sort of prayer for the purification of the catechumen.

*APOPHTHEGMATA—MACARIUS*

Among the first monks, in fourth-century Egypt, the severity of the fasts was phenomenal. We have stories from these early ascetics that have not lost their power to amaze. Here is one instance, told of the ascetic Macarius who one Lent visited a monastery incognito:

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<sup>4</sup> Ps 68/69. 5, B10.

<sup>5</sup> Mk 9.29. Some manuscripts read “. . . only by prayer.”

Lent came on and Macarius saw each monk practising different ways of asceticism—one eating in the evening only, another every two days, another every five, another again standing all night but sitting down by day. So having moistened palm-leaves in large numbers, he stood in a corner and until the forty days were completed and Easter had come, ate no bread and drank no water, neither knelt down nor reclined, and apart from a few cabbage leaves took nothing, and then only on Sunday, that he might appear to eat. . . . The monks, seeing this, raised a revolt against the superior, saying: “Where did you get this fleshless man from, to condemn us? Either drive him out, or know that we are all leaving.” Pachomius [realizing at last who the stranger was] said, “I thank you for letting my children feel your fist, lest they should be proud of their ascetic achievements. Now go away to your own place, for you have edified us sufficiently.”<sup>6</sup>

I like the final words of this passage: “. . . you have edified us sufficiently.” In other words, Macarius was to be admired, not imitated.

#### *THE MIDDLE AGES*

During the Middle Ages, fasting among Catholics was severe and universal. It’s not hard to see why. In a rural society, provisions for winter were gathered and stored during summer and autumn. At the best of times, food would have been short in spring, the season of Lent. If the harvest had been poor, fasting would have been as much a physical fact as a religious observance. But the Christian is able to recognize God’s hand in the details of his life, and so fasting, even when it was unavoidable, was spiritually profitable. The Tuesday before the beginning of Lent—mardi gras or carnival—was the day to rid the kitchen of every trace of meat. Pancakes were eaten because they were cooked in lard, the last lard that would be used until Easter. Back in the 1950s, when I was a student at the University of Toronto, the fast was still demanding, although not nearly as severe as it had been. I remember coming cold and hungry after a full morning of lectures, to lunch on a bit of bread and cheese and an apple.

#### *FASTING IN 2009*

Nowadays, the fast has been reduced to vanishing point, and yet we are still required by Scripture and tradition to fast. Our fast, however, must take another form, translating into contemporary terms the variety of Lenten

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<sup>6</sup> Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 18.

penances we saw in that Egyptian monastery visited by Macarius: “. . . one eating in the evening only, another every two days, another every five, another again standing all night but sitting down by day.” Severe fasting from food, however, is difficult if not impossible for most people today. For one thing, few of us live in the country. Our working days do not vary with the seasons, as they do on a farm, letting up in winter and intensifying in the summer and autumn. We work as hard in March as we do in August—probably harder, if anything. Hence the inevitable physical weaknesses produced by fasting, which would be quite acceptable to those mediaeval men and women without much to do, are ruled out for us. But there is a psychological effect of fasting that we are obliged to acquire.

### *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FASTING*

The psychology of fasting is typical of the Catholic approach to becoming a saint, a goal that each of us dedicates himself to by being baptized. Our spirituality is based on the premise that with practice one can grow into an understanding of worship and holiness. The principle can be succinctly expressed: one imitates the external symptoms of a certain spiritual state in order to internalize it. For example, every serious Christian will want to keep the Sabbath holy, which for Catholics means attending Mass. The obligation is therefore a constraint only for the person who has not spiritually mature enough to want this essential element of our religion. But by obeying the commandment, one gradually develops an understanding of the importance of participating in public worship every Sunday.

What then is the attitude that should make someone want to fast and which, according to our Catholic psychology, we try to attain by fasting? Think of situations where the very idea of eating is distressing. I can think of three such situations. The first one is severe grief. When someone dies, neighbours often bring food to the home of the deceased, knowing that the family is likely to neglect eating at such a time. Secondly, illness usually takes away one's appetite. And thirdly, people may also forget to eat when they are engrossed in some activity: a moment of inspiration for a writer or composer, for example, or a scientist struggling to solve an anomaly in his observations, or sometimes even a boy or girl doing homework.

Each of these has its parallel in Lenten fasting. The first one—grief—describes the Christian whose meditation on the suffering and death of Christ is so intense that he shares the sorrow of Our Lady at the foot of the cross. Someone we love has died, and died for us. Although we may not grieve to the extent that we should, our acting as if we did by fasting is a means of keeping Christ's sacrifice alive in our minds. The second reason

for fasting—illness—is something like the mental state of a Christian who has become aware of the heinousness of sin. If we could see our sins for the evil they are, we would be in such great distress that the thought of food would be unbearable. Few of us, alas, have that sensitivity, but by a sort of holy pretense we imitate the symptoms of a saint in order to approach his sanctity. And to the third—being lost in thought—corresponds the attention we learn to give to the things of God. Again, I suppose none of us would claim to have attained that degree of holiness, but we can move towards it by creating an emptiness in our lives that only God can fill.

There is thus an element in common among all of these reasons for fasting; each creates a vacuum, a condition that the spirit as well as nature abhors. That sort of vacuum will not come about as a result of the minimal fast required of Catholics today, but there are other forms of fasting that will serve. In Canada today, entertainment is the “food” on which we glut ourselves. Modern fasting, therefore, will achieve its goal if we make space for God by reducing or even eliminating pastimes that contribute little or nothing to our awareness of God. Consider television, for instance. Honestly now, what would be lost by limiting its use to, say, the news? If your answer is not “nothing would be lost,” I would say, “You have an addiction.” Why not unplug the tube during all of Lent? News, if that’s your excuse for watching, can be had from the radio or newspapers. As well, why not ration or eliminate your viewing of movies, in the cinema or on DVDs? And what about computer games or surfing the net, which is at best a waste of time and at worst an occasion of sin? Give some thought to how you spend your leisure time, and arrange your programme of “fasting” this Lent accordingly. If you are serious about your faith, “this is the acceptable time, this is the day of salvation.”<sup>7</sup>

I mentioned that the spirit as well as nature abhors a vacuum. The time released by your Lenten fasts must be filled with something. Otherwise, you will lose rather than gain ground in your spiritual journey. Recall the words of Jesus:

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest, but he finds none. Then he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when he comes he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Cor. 6.2.

there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.<sup>8</sup>

With what will you fill the space created by your fasting? In the Bible, prayer and almsgiving are the traditional practices that accompany fasting. Over the next couple of weeks we shall be considering each one of these, finishing our series of talks with an exhortation to your making an Easter confession, another traditional observance of Lent.

### *CONCLUSION*

Let me add a word of warning to these remarks. Anyone who has fasted from food and drink will tell you that there are unexpected mental and physical side effects. We are psychosomatic unities, so that what happens to the body has its effect on the mind, and vice-versa. Hence the physical weakness and lassitude, which robs the faster of his energy has a psychological parallel in a weakening of the powers of the will and intellect. In other words, fasting from food can make a person irritable and an easy prey to temptations of all sorts. It's as if the walls around a city suddenly collapsed, leaving it at the mercy of the enemy. The sort of fasting I am suggesting—namely, reducing or eliminating the distraction of too much media—will also have its effect, physical as well as psychological. Don't be surprised, therefore, if you find it difficult to persevere in your good intentions; nothing worthwhile is attained with effort. If this Lent is your first serious attempt at spiritual growth, you must expect to stagger and even to fall. But take heart. You are not the first or the last to experience these difficulties. The monks of the Egyptian desert knew them well, and knew also what to do them. Once an aspiring young monk asked his mentor how he had become so obviously holy. He received the following answer: "I fall down, and I get up again. Then I fall again and get up. And again. That is the secret of holiness."

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<sup>8</sup> Matt 12.43-45.