

1st Sunday of Lent – March 9&10, 2019 – Reflection on Fasting

"Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were over He was hungry."

The Gospel of Luke

Last Wednesday, Catholics came from near and far to our Churches to begin the great and holy season of lent, that time of more intense prayer, fasting, and almsgiving begun in the ashes of penance. Our churches were filled with people coming to be marked for Christ with a black cross on the forehead to remind that all of us come from dust and to dust we shall return; all of us come from the clay of the earth, formed by the hand of God, enlivened by the breath of God, moving in life's journey to death and dust again, but promised eternal life for those who are faithful to God.

Ash Wednesday brought so many people to profess publically that they are Catholic, that they follow Jesus Christ, that they have sinned, and that they want to change their hearts and change their lives to live the way of the Gospel and not the way of selfishness. It was edifying to see how alive faith is despite very real problems in the Church.

Fittingly, I think, the day of ashes that begins the Lenten penance and sacrifice, is a day when we are called to fast and abstain from meat - a

small self-denial offered to God as a sign of our seriousness about changing our ways and coming back to the Lord. A friend of mine who had been at an early Mass on that day told me later that she was gratified to see so many people in church that morning but was disappointed to see many of those same people out at breakfast a little later filling their plates with bacon and sausage as if there were no fast, no abstinence, no sacrifice. Sadly, I must confess I wasn't overly surprised. Ever since the Garden of Eden, people have wanted immediate gratification, wanted to eat the "forbidden fruit" because they saw no value in waiting, or denying themselves the pleasure. People, by and large, have never been able to wrap their heads - or hearts - around the value of abstaining or sacrificing, or fasting.

So what could possibly be the value of denying myself, taking up the cross, and following Jesus daily? We all know about the forbidden fruit of Adam and Eve and just where that landed them, but what if they had fasted? Could self-denial and abstinence and fasting have any value for us?

When I deny myself the fruit of the moment, the fruit of present desire, when I fast from immediate self-gratification, I may be hungry in the moment, but I open myself to feasting on other sweet and healthful fruits.

The Five Fruits of Fasting are:

1. HUMILITY - fasting teaches me that everything isn't always about me and what I want when I want it; fasting opens my eyes to how dependent upon God and others I really am;
2. REPARATION FOR PAST EXCESSES - fasting reminds me of so many times in my life that I have been a glutton, that I have

become mired in lust, so many times that I have worried about gaining the whole world to fill my closets and fill my bank account all the while losing a little bit of my soul in the process;

3. **SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR** - fasting makes me stop for a second to look at my stocked pantry shelves, my full refrigerator and freezer, my convenient grocery store, and my favorite restaurants and realize that I can afford all that I could eat pretty easily, but there are other people, the least of my brothers and sisters, who don't have the luxury of choosing to fast ... they fast most days whether they want to or not;
4. **SHOWS THE SUPERIORITY OF THE SPIRITUAL OVER THE PHYSICAL** - fasting teaches me that bread will satisfy my hunger, but in a few hours, I'll just be hungry all over again; but the Bread that Jesus gives: His Word; His life; His Communion satisfies and enriches forever;
5. **INTERCESSION** - fasting puts real teeth into my prayer: when I tell someone to let me know if there's anything I can do to help; when I tell someone that they're in my prayers, it can be all talk to make me look good and generous and caring; but if I add real sacrifice to my prayer, real fasting from my convenience and my schedule to my offer to help, well then my prayer becomes powerful, my help becomes genuine.

So, on the Friday's of lent, I may have a craving to bite into a juicy sirloin or to take the kids out for a burger at McDonald's or a pepperoni pizza at A&D. On the fast days of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, I may want a snack; I may want a big lunch with people from the office and then dine out with friends in the evening. What's so wrong with that? Nothing really ... nothing except that it's a forbidden fruit

and if I keep filling myself with that kind of rotten fruit, I'll never be able to savor the fruit that will build me into the person, into the Christian, into the child of God I could be ... I want to be ... I was called to be.