

The Meaning of Lent

From Toronto, [*Salt + Light's Fr Tom Rosica CSB*](#):

Why are there forty days in Lent? It took forty days for sinfulness to drown in the flood before a new creation could inherit the earth. It took forty years for the generation of slaves to die before the freeborn could enter the promised land. For forty days Moses, Elijah and Jesus fasted and prayed to prepare themselves for a life's work.

Lent invites us to turn from our own selves, from our sin, to come together in community. Self-denial is the way we express our repentance. Self-denial is threefold, advises Matthew's gospel. We pray: "Go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private." We fast: "No one must see you are fasting but your Father." We give alms: "Keep your deeds of mercy secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you." Through the Lenten exercise of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, we spring-clean our lives, sharpen our senses, put tomorrow in its place and treasure the day at hand.

One of the three Lenten practices open to the most misinterpretation today is that of fasting. Fasting has become an ambiguous practice. In antiquity, only religious fasting was known; today, political and social fasting exists (hunger strikes), health and ideological fasting (vegetarians), pathological fasting (anorexia), aesthetic fasting (the cult of the body-believing that thinner is better). There is, above all, a fast imposed by necessity: that of millions of human beings who lack the indispensable minimum and die of hunger.

These fasts in themselves have nothing to do with religious or aesthetic reasons. In aesthetic fasting at times one can even "mortify" the vice of gluttony only to obey another capital vice, that of pride or vanity. Fasting, in itself, is something good and advisable; it translates some fundamental religious attitudes: reverence before God, acknowledgment of one's sins, resistance to the desires of the flesh, concern for and solidarity with the poor. ... As with all human things, however, it can fall into "presumption of the flesh." Remember the words of the Pharisee in the temple: "I fast twice a week" (Luke 18:12).

Lent is a time for us to discover the reasons for the pious practices, disciplines and devotions of our Catholic Christian tradition. What have we done with the important Lenten practice of fasting? If Jesus were here to speak to disciples of today, what would he stress most? We regard as more important the need to "share bread with the hungry and clothe the naked"; we are in fact ashamed to call ours a "fast," when what would be for us the height of austerity – to be on bread and water – for millions of people would already be an extraordinary luxury, especially if it is fresh bread and clean water.

Fasting helps us not to be reduced to pure "consumers"; it helps us to acquire the precious "fruit of the Spirit," which is "self-control," it predisposes us to the encounter with God. We must empty ourselves in order to be filled by God. Fasting creates authentic solidarity with millions of hungry people throughout the world. But we must not forget that there are alternative forms of fasting and abstinence from food. We can practice fasting from smoking and drinking. This not only benefits the soul but also the body. There is fasting from violent and sexual pictures that television, movies, magazines and Internet bombard us with daily as they distort human dignity. There is the fasting from condemning and dismissing others- a practice so prevalent in today's Church.

"For now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" We need Lent to help us recognize that our identity and mission are rooted in Jesus' dying and rising. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the pillars of the Lenten journey for Christians. Lent is a time to fast from certain things but also a time to feast on others. Fast from discontent, anger, bitterness, self-concern, discouragement, laziness, suspicion, guilt. Feast on gratitude, patience, forgiveness, compassion for others, hope, commitment, truth, and the mercy of God. Lent is just such a time of fasting and feasting!