

Why and How do Christians Fast?

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In the Ash Wednesday Gospel reading, Jesus says “when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt 6:17-18).

Notice that Jesus doesn’t say “If you fast . . .”—the implication is that Jesus’ disciples will fast. Aside from teaching his disciples to fast humbly and not call attention to themselves, Jesus does not give explicit instructions about *how* and *when* to fast. Even the *why* seems to be taken for granted in the Gospels.

During this season of Lent, as many Christians practice some form of fasting, it may be helpful to consider some of the reasons why the Church has practiced fasting over the centuries, as well as how Christians practice fasting. First the why.

We fast to learn self-control.

For starters, we do not fast because we’re dualistic, gnostic, platonic, or don’t see value in food. The creation is good, and we honor God’s intentions for the world and our bodies when we nourish our bodies appropriately. But often we are not the best judges of what is appropriate. One of the fruits of the Spirit is “self-control”—the ability to discipline one’s appetites and urges. Fasting helps produce this fruit in our lives.

For example, because the same part of our brain that controls our appetite for food also controls our sexual appetites, the monastic tradition has long recommended fasting as a remedy for lust. On a larger scale, by delaying the gratification of our appetite for food, we cultivate the sort of self-discipline that is valuable in all things (1 Pet 4:8). As Richard Foster wrote, “Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels” (*Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1998], p. 56).

We fast to think more clearly.

Our culture has a playful term for the drowsy and sluggish feeling one has after eating too much: a “food coma.” But it’s hard to pray when you’re in a food coma. Jesus invites us to practice watchfulness instead of drunkenness (Luke 21:34), and we can be more mentally alert to pray and serve when we’re not weighed down by too much food. St. John Cassian was a monk who lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, and whose writings influenced the famous *Rule of St. Benedict*. Writing about why we ought to fast, Cassian said, “It is not only too much wine that besots our mind: too much water or too much of anything makes it drowsy and stupefied” (“On the Eight Vices,” in *The Philokalia vol. 1*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, & Kallistos Ware [London: Faber and Faber, 1979], p. 74).

Fasting can have the opposite effect: sharpening our thinking and making us more attentive to God and those to whom God sends us. (Many of us will respond at this point, “But I get cranky when I don’t eat!” Anger is obviously not a desired fruit of fasting, but here’s a hint: eating a low carbohydrate diet makes it easier to fast without getting irritable, because it forces your body to get used to burning fat for energy, and fat is a more stable source of energy. Try it.)

Perhaps this clarity of mind is why the disciples—“while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting”—heard the Holy Spirit calling them to send out Barnabas and Saul as missionaries in Acts 13:2-3. This

means that fasting can be a powerful, but often misunderstood or overlooked element in our processes of discernment.

We fast to open ourselves up to God's power flowing through us.

A curious thing happens when Jesus gets caught up in conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4: He doesn't get hungry, even though the other disciples are off searching for lunch. Jesus tells his disciples, "I have food to eat that you do not know about. . . . My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (vv. 32, 34). Jesus, in his full humanity, practiced fasting as a way to live in the power of the Spirit and do the Father's will. The inverse of this statement shows us that fasting is not a way to manipulate God. Fasting does not bend God's will to match our own; rather, it bends our will to match God's. And when our will is aligned with God's, we may discover that power greater than we imagine is at work within us (Eph 3:20).

We fast to confess our sin and brokenness.

This is most appropriate during the season of Lent, as we practice turning back to God and away from our sinful or selfish desires. Repentance gets short shrift in our proclamation of the Gospel today, but it was integral to the proclamation of Christ and the Apostles (cf. Matt 4:17; Acts 2:38; 2 Cor 7:10). To quote Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* again, "More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us" (p. 55). Fasting reveals the attachments we have to the world and demonstrates our desire to be attached only to Christ. To fast without an element of soul-searching and relinquishment of one's own will is self-defeating.

All these reasons to practice fasting are valid. But maybe now you're asking, "How? And where do I begin?" So now let's take a closer look at *how* Christians fast.

Eating Less

Though there was no single method St. John Cassian prescribed in "On the Eight Vices," he did offer "a single goal: avoid overeating and the filling of our bellies" (p. 73). While going long periods of time without food is a common form of fasting in Scripture, for many of us it can backfire and lead to binge eating when breaking a fast. In contrast, refusing to get seconds or putting down your fork before you're full can be a simple but powerful way to fast and to avoid the dangers of either irritability or binge eating.

Eating at Fixed Times

In Celtic monasticism, people such as St. Aidan often waited until after 3:00 p.m. to eat, but then ate whatever was available in moderation. They didn't want to eat during the hours when Christ was on the cross. How might the timing of your meals create a greater awareness for you of the events of Christ's life?

Eating a Disciplined Diet

Our Eastern-Christian sisters and brothers abstain from meat and dairy products on most Wednesdays and Fridays during the year and do the same throughout the entire season of Lent. Wednesdays are traditionally fasting days because they are the day on which Judas agreed to betray Jesus. Fridays are fasting days because the crucifixion occurred on that day of the week. The restricted diet helps one grow in consciousness and discipline but doesn't deplete one's energy as much as a total fast.

Eating With Your Attention on Christ

St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote, “While one is eating, it is good to imagine Christ our Lord eating in company with his apostles, and to observe how he eats, how he drinks, how he looks about, and how he converses, and then to try to imitate him. In this way, one’s mind will be occupied chiefly with the consideration of Our Lord and less with the sustenance of the body” (*Spiritual Exercises and Selected Writings* [New York, NY: Paulist Press 1991], p. 172). Similarly, I know a pastor who has a large replica of Rublev’s famous Trinity Icon in his dining room. When he practices his morning devotions, he imagines sitting at the table with the Trinity. How might we eat differently if we were sitting at the table with Jesus?

Regardless of how we fast, we do it as a discipline to bring us closer to God.