

By Victor M. Parachin

The Fasting Track

Sixteen great reasons to fast

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2. Fasting is a way of preparing to meet a major challenge. People in the bible who faced great trials and troubles often dealt with them through prayer and fasting. Whenever special courage, insight, strength was needed, they turned to prayer combined with fasting. For example, before Queen Esther approached the king asking him to spare the Jews from destruction, she asked her people to spend three days in prayer and fasting.

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4. Fasting is encouraged by the spiritual giants of the faith. From the second through the fifth centuries, many important church leaders and mystics recommended fasting. Often they linked fasting to acts of kindness and love as an important spiritual discipline. Included in that group are: Clement of Rome, John Chrysostom, Peter Chrysologus, Jerome and Augustine. In fact, Augustine offered this spiritual advice: "Do you wish your prayer to fly toward God? Give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving."

5. Fasting benefits others. There is a practical opportunity connected with fasting. The money saved by not eating can be shared with others. Consider the experience of Ron, a Midwest attorney. "Most workdays I eat lunch out at a restaurant, usually with clients or colleagues. Last year during Lent I decided to skip lunch once a week. I remained in my office reading devotional materials and offering prayers. Each week I set aside the money I would have spent on lunch. When Lent was over I mailed a check off to a homeless shelter in the community."

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Behind that statement is the truth that people experience a hunger which cannot be filled merely by food and other material things. Ultimately, meaning, satisfaction and fulfillment in life result from a healthy relationship to God. Fasting is one way of nurturing that relationship.

Good for Self-Discipline

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Although most Christians may not feel the need to do a lengthy fast, there are benefits to be gained from even a short period of self-denial. Here are 16 reminders priest can offer parishioners why fasting is a good discipline to engage in periodically.

1. Fasting expands compassion. It's easy to talk about the problem of world hunger but the physical impact and emotional awareness is heightened when we do without food. "My sensitivity to the plight of the poor increased," says one woman who fasted.

"Eating only one meal a day made me tired and resentful and mine was a voluntary fast. What was it like for those who were lucky to get one meal a day? I couldn't be indifferent to their suffering once I'd shared it."

2. Fasting is a way of preparing to meet a major challenge. People in the bible who faced great trials and troubles often dealt with them through prayer and fasting. Whenever special courage, insight, strength was needed, they turned to prayer combined with fasting. For example, before Queen Esther approached the king asking him to spare the Jews from destruction, she asked her people to spend three days in prayer and fasting.

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She felt that such a difficult enterprise needed prayers fortified by fasting if her effort was to be successful. "When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish," she said (Est 4:16). Consequently, Esther approached the king with confidence and boldness, persuading him to reverse an edict which called for the annihilation of the Jews. A modern application would be to spend time in prayer and fasting whenever a personal or professional crisis looms.

3. Fasting can help you move from a negative to a positive spiritual outlook. Too often in times past, fasting was attached to a negative inheritance, that of mortifying the flesh or atoning for sins committed. While those can be legitimate spiritual concerns, fasting can also be utilized in a positive way. Some contemporary Christians describe fasting as a positive means to "shake the spirit," to "refocus priorities," to "connect ourselves to Jesus."

4. Fasting is encouraged by the spiritual giants of the faith. From the second through the fifth centuries, many important church leaders and mystics recommended fasting. Often they linked fasting to acts of kindness and love as an important spiritual discipline. Included in that group are: Clement of Rome, John Chrysostom, Peter Chrysologus, Jerome and Augustine. In fact, Augustine offered this spiritual advice: "Do you wish your prayer to fly toward God? Give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving."

5. Fasting benefits others. There is a practical opportunity connected with fasting. The money saved by not eating can be shared with others. Consider the experience of Ron, a Midwest attorney. "Most workdays I eat lunch out at a restaurant, usually with clients or colleagues. Last year during Lent I decided to skip lunch once a week. I remained in my office reading devotional materials and offering prayers. Each week I set aside the money I would have spent on lunch. When Lent was over I mailed a check off to a homeless shelter in the community."

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