

# Fasting

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## *The Words of Spirituality*

by ENZO BIANCHI

As human beings we are nourished not only by food, but also by the words and gestures we exchange with others

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In Western Christianity today we are observing a *de facto* elimination of the ecclesial practice of fasting. Although fasting was practiced by the people of Israel, re-proposed by Christ, and incorporated into the great ecclesial tradition, it is less and less present today, and often our churches no longer request it. Yet if we want to discover the truth of who we are, the truth of our humanity which, with grace, becomes Christian truth, we need to think, pray, share what we have, and recognize the evil that dwells in us - but we also need to practice the form of oral discipline that is fasting. Eating belongs to the category of desire, because it goes beyond the simple function of providing us with nourishment and takes on highly significant affective and symbolic connotations. As human beings we are nourished not only by food, but also by the words and gestures we exchange with others, by relationships and love, and by everything else that gives meaning to the life food sustains and builds up in us. We also eat together with others, in an atmosphere of conversation and conviviality. Eating, speaking and kissing are all forms of oral expression, and since they are connected to the biological, communicative and affective dimensions of human life, they involve the entire person who receives life through these dimensions. Fasting carries out the basic function of helping us identify what it is that we hunger for, what gives us life, and what nourishes us, so that we can set our different appetites in order in a way that allows what is truly central in our life to remain central.

We would be deceiving ourselves profoundly if we thought that fasting, which has been practiced in many different forms and degrees in Christian tradition - total fasting, fasting from meat, a diet of vegetables or of bread and water - could be replaced by any other form of ascetic discipline. Eating is particularly significant because it is an infant's first way of relating to the external world. Infants are nourished by their mother's milk, but as they are initially unable to distinguish their mother from food, they also seek nourishment in all that surrounds them. They 'eat' and take in voices, odors, shapes, and faces, and through this process they gradually construct a personality, relationships and an emotional life. This means that the symbolic value of fasting is connected to all of the external aspects that contribute to the construction of our identity. Other forms of asceticism cannot be considered 'equivalents' to fasting, because they are associated with other symbolic values and are thus unable to carry out fasting's unique function. Different ascetic practices are not interchangeable! When we fast, we learn to recognize and control our many appetites by first controlling our most basic and vital appetite, hunger. We learn to exercise discipline in our relationships with others, with external reality and with God, relationships in which the temptation of voracity is always present. Fasting is a way of disciplining our need and educating our desire.

Only an insipid and ignorant form of Christianity that thinks of itself more and more as social morality can dismiss fasting as essentially irrelevant, and can make the mistake of thinking that any resolution to go without something 'extra' (and therefore not as vital as food and eating) can take the place of fasting. This is a docetic trend that makes the created reality of human beings only 'apparent,' and that forgets both the body's significance and 'density' and the fact that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Fasting is actually the way a Christian confesses faith in the Lord with his or her entire body. It is an antidote to our tendency to reduce the spiritual life to its intellectual dimension, or to confuse the spiritual with the psychological. Certainly, as there is always the risk of our turning fasting into an ascetic performance or an accomplishment deserving of a reward, the Christian tradition reminds us that our fasting should be hidden and governed by humility, and that it should have a precise objective - justice, the sharing of what we have, and love for God and our neighbor (Isaiah 58:4-7; Matthew 6:1-18). This is the reason why the Christian tradition has conducted a carefully balanced and judicious reflection on the subject of fasting: "Fasting is useless and even dangerous for those who are not familiar with its peculiarities and conditions" (John Chrysostom); "It is better to eat meat and drink wine and not to eat the flesh of one's brothers through slanderous words" (Abba Hyperechius); "If you fast regularly, do not be inflated with pride; if you think highly of yourself because of it, then you had better eat meat. It is better for a man to eat meat than to be inflated with pride and glorify himself" (Isidore the Elder).

We are indeed what we eat, and the believer does not live by bread alone, but above all by the eucharistic Word and Bread and by the divine life they transmit. The personal and ecclesial practice of fasting is one of the ways we follow Jesus, who fasted (Matthew 4:2); it is an expression of our obedience to the Lord, who asked his disciples to pray and fast (Matthew 6:16-18; 9:15; Mark 9:29); it is a confession of faith expressed with our body; and it is a pedagogical tool that teaches us to worship God with our entire being (we should note that the verb 'worship' or 'adore' refers us to the mouth, os-oris, and therefore to the oral dimension of life). Today, in a society in which consumerism has dulled our ability to distinguish true needs from false ones, in which fasting and dieting have become an industry, in which fasting is easily associated with Asian ascetic techniques, and in which Lent is sometimes equated with the Muslim Ramadan, Christians should remember the anthropological basis of fasting as well as its specifically Christian significance. Fasting is truly an essential aspect of faith because it leads us to the question, "As a Christian, what is it that gives you life?"

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