



# Fasting

God commanded it, Jesus practiced it, Church Fathers have preached the importance of it—fasting is a powerful and fundamental part of the Christian life. The purpose of our fast is to not become physically weak or lose weight but to create a hunger, a spiritual voice that only Christ can fill. These acts of self-denial dispose us to free ourselves from worldly distractions, to express our longing for Jesus, to somehow imitate his suffering. Every Ash Wednesday we hear from the prophet Joel (2:12-14): “Yet even now—oracle of the Lord—

return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning. Rend your heart, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God.”

Msgr. Charles Murphy, the author of *The Spirituality of Fasting*, defines the spiritual practice of fasting in the following way: “Religious fasting first of all is an act of humility before God, a penitential expression of our need for conversion from sin and selfishness. Its aim is nothing less than helping us to become more loving persons, loving God above all and our neighbour as ourselves. Its purpose therefore is the transformation of our total being—mind, body, and spirit.” In essence, fasting is intentionally emptying oneself to be receptive to something else, namely God.

## CATHOLIC FASTING

The Church prescribes the following kinds of fasts particularly during the season of Lent:

**Ash Wednesday and Good Friday**—are obligatory days of fasting and abstinence and therefore we should not eat meat on these days. Those fasting are permitted one full meal and two smaller meals (snacks) that together do not equal the size of a full meal.

**Fridays During Lent**—On all Fridays during Lent, Catholics should abstain from eating meat.

**Other Fridays during the Year**—Every Friday is set aside as a day of weekly abstinence from meat. So while not obliged to fast on all Fridays, Catholics are encouraged by their own free will to abstain from meat or make some other act of penitence as an “outward sign of inward spiritual values”.

## MAKING SURE FASTING DURING LENT IS A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Fast in the context of the Lord’s Prayer. ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’

Fasting expresses prayer in bodily form.

Fasting can be used in the fight against temptation.

Fasting leads us into solidarity with the poor.

## RULES FOR FASTING

1. Fast in secret. (Ref. Matthew 6:16-18)

2. Have the right motives. When you fast, you shouldn’t:

- Fast to be seen by others
- Fast for a reward
- Fast to be righteous

But when you fast, you should:

- Fast to deny oneself
- Fast to deepen spiritual hunger for God
- Fast for God’s intervention in your life

3. Learn what Scripture says about fasting.
4. Identify the purpose. Be intentional about determining the purpose of your fast. Are you fasting for clarity on a decision, for a deepening of your relationship with God?
5. Determine the length of the fast.
6. Try different kinds of fasting

One more thing about fasting during Lent: **Sundays don't count!** Sundays are "feast days," which means you don't practice your fast on Sundays. (The entire season of Lent is actually 46 days long: 40 days of fasting and 6 Sundays of feasting!) Practicing a feast day helps make our Lenten fasts sustainable.

### **GOOD REASONS FOR FASTING.** (Adapted from Fr. Mike Schmitz)

Keep in mind we should not fast for God's favour or attention. We already have that!

1. For self mastery. If we cannot say no to something, then we are a slave to that thing. Jesus came to set us free.
2. Obedience and discernment. In the New Testament, the disciples fast while listening for the Holy Spirit.
3. Worship. We sacrifice a legitimate pleasure to express our love for God.
4. To be a co-redeemer. St. Paul tells us that our sufferings make up for what is lacking in the suffering of Christ for the sake of his body, that is, the Church (Col 1:24; Phil 3:10; 2 Cor 1:5). Jesus offers us a small particle of his cross so we can participate in the salvation of the world with Him.

### **FASTING IDEAS FOR LENT**

#### **FAST FROM SOMETHING YOU ENJOY**

- Give up a favourite TV programme for a week. It helps build your self-control.
- Give up sweets or drinks.
- Give up complaining. To really not complain at all is more difficult than it sounds.
- Give up alcohol or smoking.

#### **FAST FROM A BAD ATTITUDE OR HABIT**

- Fast from comparing yourself to others. When we become more accepting of our own gifts and talents and less envious of what others do or have we can live in a new freedom.
- Fast from Over-Scheduling. Over-scheduling can be a real problem. If we do not have enough unscheduled time, we cannot live in the moment.
- Fast from gossip. It impacts on our relationships with each other and divides the Body of Christ. It can easily become a bad habit and a false way to develop a feeling of belonging.
- Fast from taking the Lord's name in vain or the use of bad language.
- Fast from worrying. 1 Peter reminds us, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for us" (5:7),
- Fast from Criticising. It is difficult to let go of the desire to criticise, either aloud to others or in our thoughts.
- Fast from over-eating, mindless eating, snacking.
- Fast from staying up late at night. Ensure you get enough sleep. Establish a proper routine.

- Fast from recklessly disposing of rubbish. Consider the environment. Use bins and separate rubbish for collection.
- Fast from excessive spending of money on things you do not need.
- Fast from the amount of time you spend on social media. Fast from the temptation to make negative or derogative comments on social media.
- Fast from gaming. Video games have become a way to escape reality. Limit the amount of time you spend on games at a given time.
- Fast from your Mobile Phone. We have more time to pay attention to other people and to the Lord.
- Fast from taking things for granted. Remember Pope Francis' words: Please, Thank you, I'm sorry.

Fasting helps us focus on God as the greatest importance in our lives. It unites us with our Lord Jesus who fasted in the desert for 40 days. This is a good time to think about what is ruling your life. Where is your attention drawn? What is occupying your time and thoughts? Give that thing up. And then when Lent is over, contemplate where your focus went when you no longer had that thing. Were you more able to focus on God and others?

**Adapted from:**

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