

Fasting Shouldn't Be Out of Style, Says Pope

Benefits Recognized for Millennia Still Valid

Fasting is as important as ever and it is a "therapy" to heal obstacles to conforming to God's will, says Benedict XVI.



The Holy Father recalled that the liturgy proposes three specific practices during Lent: prayer, almsgiving and fasting. And he said that his message this year would focus on the history and importance of fasting.

The Pontiff noted how fasting was prominent in both the Old and New Testaments: "Like Moses, who fasted before receiving the tablets of the Law and Elijah's fast before meeting the Lord on Mount Horeb, Jesus, too, through prayer and fasting, prepared himself for the mission that lay before him, marked at the start by a serious battle with the tempter."

Benedict XVI went on to acknowledge that the meaning of fasting -- "depriving ourselves of something that in itself is good and useful for our bodily sustenance" -- might not be immediately clear.

But he explained that "sacred Scriptures and the entire Christian tradition teach that fasting is a great help to avoid sin and all that leads to it. For this reason, the history of salvation is replete with occasions that invite fasting. [...]"

"Since all of us are weighed down by sin and its consequences, fasting is proposed to us as an instrument to restore friendship with God."

Jesus' teaching

A deeper meaning for fasting is revealed by Christ, the Pope explained.

"True fasting [...] is rather to do the will of the Heavenly Father, who 'sees in secret, and will

reward you," the papal message notes. "[Christ] himself sets the example, answering Satan, at the end of the 40 days spent in the desert that 'man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.' The true fast is thus directed to eating the 'true food,' which is to do the Father's will. [T]he believer, through fasting, intends to submit himself humbly to God, trusting in his goodness and mercy."

The first Christian communities and the fathers of the Church also point to the importance of fasting, the Holy Father continued.

"Moreover," he said, "fasting is a practice that is encountered frequently and recommended by the saints of every age."

A rediscovery

Nevertheless, the Pontiff observed, "fasting seems to have lost something of its spiritual meaning, and has taken on, in a culture characterized by the search for material well-being, a therapeutic value for the care of one's body. Fasting certainly brings benefits to physical well-being, but for believers, it is, in the first place, a 'therapy' to heal all that prevents them from conformity to the will of God."

Recalling a 1966 document written by Pope Paul VI, "Pænitemini," Benedict XVI said that this Lent could be a "propitious time to present again the norms contained in the apostolic constitution, so that the authentic and perennial significance of this long held practice may be rediscovered, and thus assist us to mortify our egoism and open our heart to love of God and neighbor."

Finally, in addition to the personal benefits of fasting, the Holy Father said, the penance also helps to foster solidarity.

"Voluntary fasting enables us to grow in the spirit of the Good Samaritan, who bends low and goes to the help of his suffering brother," he said. "By freely embracing an act of self-denial for the sake of another, we make a statement that our brother or sister in need is not a stranger."

"From what I have said thus far," the Bishop of Rome affirmed, "it seems abundantly clear that fasting represents an important ascetical practice, a spiritual arm to do battle against every possible disordered attachment to ourselves."

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