



A Lenten Pastoral letter

Bishop Brendan Leahy

Lent 2026 – Reflections on Fasting

There are three pillars of Lent – prayer, almsgiving and fasting. In the past two years, we have looked more closely at prayer and almsgiving. This year I propose we reflect on the topic of fasting. There was greater talk of fasting in the past. Those of a certain age remember no meat on Fridays. In the remote past fasting was very much part not only of Lent but also of Advent. Some churches, such as the Coptic church, still today have many days of fasting during the year. Some saints, such as Sister Faustina promoted fasting. While fasting is not a central element of the Christian faith, it has a place and perhaps we need to rediscover its value.

This letter is specifically about fasting during Lent. Catholics aged between 18 and 59 who are in reasonable health, are required to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, that is, to eat one full meal and two smaller meals, avoiding snacks between meals, though liquids are permitted. During Lent we are encouraged to take on some form of fasting. Naturally, common sense prevails. No fast should result in putting your health in danger. The sick, the elderly, pregnant or nursing women, as well as manual labourers are excused from strict fasts. Sundays during Lent are not “prescribed days of fasting and abstinence” though many choose to keep their fast also on Sundays.



Fasting – A Worldwide Practice

Fasting is a practice found in many of the World's Religions. We are familiar with the Islamic tradition of fasting during daylight hours throughout the period of Ramadan. It is a key pillar of their faith, fostering self-denial and closeness to God. In Buddhism fasting sometimes take the form of not eating meat and not eating after midday. It is considered a tool to train the mind in the path to enlightenment. In some of the Hindu traditions, abstinence from food is seen as a form of devotion to a deity, purifying mind, heart and body. We can think of the fasts Gandhi endured in his non-violent peaceful revolt in promoting the independence of his country.

The Reasons Christians Fast

Christians too value the practice of fasting, especially during the period of Lent seen as a time of spiritual renewal and training. Christians are inspired, of course, primarily by Jesus himself, the Son of God. We know that he spent forty days fasting in the desert before entering into his public ministry. As we read in the Gospel: "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry" (Mt 4:1-2). In the Old Testament there are many examples of fasting, starting with Adam and Eve initially not eating the prohibited food. We read of Moses fasting before receiving the tablets of the Law. The great prophet Elijah fasted before his special encounter with the Lord on Mount Horeb. The reluctant prophet Jonah, in calling the people of Nineveh to repentance, proclaimed a fast.

From the very beginning, Christians fasted. They saw a benefit in it. After all, Jesus Christ expected his disciples to fast and had issued instructions for how they should do so. Christians know fasting isn't just an external exercise. It is linked to prayer and the experience of merciful love in our lives. Saint Peter Chrysologus writes: "Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. So, if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others, you open God's ear to yourself".

In their fasting, Christians remember the passion and death of the Lord. They see fasting as a way of sharing in Christ's suffering. They understand fasting as an expression of inner conversion and a form of reparation for sin. Since love is what is central in the Christian life, fasting must be seen also as an expression of love for others. We know, for instance, the First Christians held special collections as a way of giving to the poor from what had been set aside from their fasting.

How does Fasting help us in Lent?

Lent is a 40-day journey of growing more deeply in love of God and our neighbour. It is a time to re-focus on what really matters in life. It is a chance to improve in being more detached from a disordered love of ourselves, others and things in order to live more for God and love our neighbour more.

God created the world good. Each of us is created good. Each one of us is created as a gift for one another. We should certainly enjoy the good things in our lives. Fasting should not be about seeing our human desires as bad. But there is a value in sometimes doing without, so as to regain focus. Because of original sin, whose negative effects impact the entire human person, we are weakened in our ability to direct our lives totally towards love of God and our neighbour. Despite being created good, there are instincts in our lives that can cause us to go off track. We need self-discipline. Catherine of Siena, for instance, described fasting as a way to scatter the clouds of concupiscence. Fasting can be viewed as a “therapy” to heal all that prevents us from aligning our will with doing the will of God.

An ancient hymn of the Lenten liturgy puts it like this: “Let us use sparingly words, food and drink, sleep and amusements. May we be more alert in the custody of our senses.” In commenting on the fasting associated with Lent, Pope Francis wrote: “Fasting will be the spiritual training ground where we joyfully renounce the superfluous things that weigh us down, grow in interior freedom and return to the truth about ourselves. Encounter with the Father, interior freedom, compassion.”¹ For Pope Francis, fasting supports us in the effort to free our heart from slavery to sin, making it evermore a “living tabernacle of God.”

There are many ways to fast

When it comes to fasting, the most common form is to deprive ourselves of food and drink, giving up biscuits, chocolate or other treats, alcohol or tea with sugar. Indeed, there was a time, up until the 1960's when Catholics fasted from meat every Friday, not just during lent. It was a time when fasting was often more about following rules rather than freely taking on voluntary acts of charity or penance. But can there be other forms of fasting than food and drink? Yes there are. We can be creative in the way we undertake fasting at Lent.²

Sobriety of lifestyle. One way is avoiding waste in our lives. Lent can be a time to check out how we can be guilty of living what Pope Francis called a “throw away” culture where we have many superfluous things and often simply use objects and then throw them away. We could focus on living a more sober lifestyle, attentive to not wasting and also learning to share and give away generously what is superfluous.

Avoiding Negative Habits. In recent years, lists of negative habits to be avoided as a form of fasting have been published on various media outlets, some of them wrongly attributed to Pope Francis. However, the general idea is good. Fasting can involve avoiding negative habits. An example of such a list could be:

Fast from judging others; see Jesus Christ who lives in them.

Fast from hurtful words; replace them with kindness.

Fast from cynicism; express gratitude.

Fast from anger; exercise patience.

Fast from pessimism; keep the light of hope on.

Fast from preoccupations; occupy yourself trusting in God

Fast from complaining; fill yourself with appreciating what surrounds you.

Fast from bitterness; fill yourself with forgiveness.

Fast from grudges; seek reconciliation

Fast from Gossip. This is one habit that Pope Francis often underlined and it can be the focus of our Lenten fast – to fast from gossip. He noted how gossip can lead to division, suffering and scandal. Indeed, gossip can be a way killing others, because it kills their reputation. In a weekly Angelus address on September 5, 2020, Pope Francis said: “When we see a mistake, a defect, a slip of a brother or sister, usually the first thing we do is go and tell others about it, to gossip. And gossip closes the heart of the community, disrupts the unity of the Church”.

He continued: “The great talker is the devil, who always goes about saying the bad things of others, because he is the liar who tries to disunite the Church, alienating brothers and sisters and unmaking community. Please, brothers and sisters, let's make an effort not to gossip. Gossiping is a plague worse than COVID”.



¹ Homily, Ash Wednesday, 22 February 2023.

² In 2011 the Irish Bishops Conference suggested the following forms of Friday Penance: Abstaining from meat or some other food; Abstaining from alcoholic drink or smoking; Making a special effort at involvement in family prayer; Making a special effort to participate in Mass on Fridays; Visiting the Blessed Sacrament; Making the Stations of the Cross; Fasting from all food for a longer period than usual and perhaps giving what is saved to the needy; Helping the poor, sick, old, or lonely.

Changing our attitude to creation. With consumerism impacting so much on all our lives, we can run the risk of abusing creation, plundering it without caring for the planet. Lent can be a time to increase our attentiveness to the gift of creation and how we use and care for the planet. In his encyclical on the care of the planet, *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis refers to St. Francis, the 800th anniversary of whose death occurs this year. The Pope comments: 'In calling to mind the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi, we come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change. The Australian bishops spoke of the importance of such conversion for achieving reconciliation with creation: "To achieve such reconciliation, we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart"'(n. 218). So things to consider for Lent here could be upcycling clothes, not buying that item which we would like but really don't need. Maybe we could donate the money instead to a charity or buy an item of clothing that we donate to a charity. This time of year this could be an item of clothing for First Holy Communion or Confirmation. People sometimes speak of living an "Eco-friendly Lent" that involves adapting, for instance, a review of their energy consumption and their use of plastics as well as educating themselves more on environmental issues.

Digital Detox. A significant way to fast is to take a break or, at least, reduce our engagement with digital/social media. Let's admit it. Most of us, and especially the young, spend a lot of time in the digital world. While social media can have such a positive influence in enabling us connect with others, spread good news, we all know there are dangerous aspects and the risk of over dependence. We are more aware today of the addictive algorithmic designs in social media. So much so that Australia has introduced a world-first social media ban for children under 16 and so many other countries, including our own, have begun considering a similar approach. So, why not take a lead and make a commitment during Lent to embark on a digital detox.

Research on taking a break from social media generally shows that even short-term disengagement can lead to significant improvements in mental health and well-being.

We can hear each other's voices instead, and we can also hear God's voice.

One of the worst vagaries to emerge from the digital revolution is the easy access to pornography, to an extent that it has become an addiction for many. Research in Ireland suggests 64% of 20-year-old men use pornography, which is linked to potential addiction, lower well-being, and poorer mental health. They can end up needing medical help to get out of the addiction as well as spiritual healing.

So, with our children the most vulnerable to social media, why not take this Lent to show them example and have adults down the social media tools, while at the same time raising your voice for a ban on social media for children up to even 17 years. Let Ireland, a nation where family is a cornerstone of society, go further than any other in terms of protecting our children. What a big and proud statement that would be as we emerge from Lent. In doing this, we certainly need to talk with young people under 17 and explain well to them why such a measure is being taken. And listen to them for any good ideas they might propose.

It is incumbent on us all to encourage each other and especially young people to use digital tools safely and ethically. For that, a formation that helps young people how to live their digital lives is needed. Lent can be a time to contribute to such a formation. It would also be good to consider designated device-free times such as mealtimes and, indeed, bed-time. There is evidence that suggests that three quarters of people take their phones to bed and over half spend more time than they intend on their phones. So, family tech-free days can help children and adults reconnect with hobbies and the physical world.

The recently canonised young saint, Carlo Acutis, who has been referred to as the 'internet saint' because of his computer technology skills, realised at a certain point that he was spending too much time online so he reduced his video game and recreational computer usage to one or two hours a week.

Fasting from activism. A feature for many of us in the Western world is the frenetic pace of life. It has been said that there is a "cult of speed" that causes people to lose their sense of direction and depth. While technological advances offer great opportunities, they can also end up driving us in furious pursuit of productivity, outcomes, efficiency. The fast pace of life can numb us to the presence of people alongside us. Lent can be a time to fast from activism, to pause a little and know how to "loose time" by spending quality time with family, friends, grandparents, and ultimately, time with God.

Pitfalls

There are pitfalls we need to watch out for in fasting.

Avoid Hypocrisy and Pride. Jesus told us that when fasting we need to avoid hypocrisy or showing off: “Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting” (Mt 6:16). It is enough to realise, as Jesus puts it, “your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you” (Mt 6:18). We have always to watch the sin of pride. Our fasting could slip into simply being about feeling good about ourselves and feel the fasting is the result of our own good work. I recall a spiritual director once advising that instead of cutting out all biscuits, why not simply decide to take just one biscuit instead of two.

Fasting is never to be a selfish act of self-perfection (it’s not about going on a diet!) or an external act that we do like ticking a “to-do” box for Lent. I recall as a child giving up crisps for Lent, but I got a box and bought the packages of crisps and saved them up until Easter – that wasn’t really a great attitude to have for a Lenten fast! Certainly, fasting is not about making ourselves miserable just for the sake of it, but in its true sense, fasting is meant to stretch us spiritually, opening us to God and our neighbour. It is a sacrifice that can bring us closer to God and to our families. In becoming aware of the sacrifice, we fill that time, that void, with better things. It is an act performed in imitation of Jesus’ self-giving (his self-denial lived heroically) on the Cross. Fasting has to be a matter of the heart and directed towards love of God and neighbour.

Fasting is not an end in itself. The prophet Isaiah reminded the people of Israel of the kind of fasting God wanted: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice... to let the oppressed go free... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them...” (Is 58:6-7). Fasting, in other words, should turn us outward –toward God and others. Our own time of “going without” should make us more mindful of those who “go without” on a regular basis, those experiencing the poverty of hunger or oppression, loneliness or pain.

The Penance that pleases Heaven

Reading the lives of some of the saints we can be struck by the extreme penances and fasting they did. Most Christians are not called to such penance and fasting. The greatest penance, we must always recall, comes in our daily efforts to love our neighbour as ourselves. This costs. But this is the penance that pleases heaven. We don’t have to go about looking too much for penances and fasting since love for one another always involves daily “mortifications” (the word means “putting to death”), that is, overcoming in us selfish attitudes in relating to others.

Each day, true love calls us to renounce pleasures or comforts so that we can overcome sinful habits and direct our lives more along the path of a love that is pure, generous and selfless. True love involves cutting away anything that distorts our love, holding back on instinctive reactions, and enduring with patience or facing with courage challenges in our relationships. These are all forms of fasting and penance.

Michelangelo said that when he went about creating a sculpture, it involved an art of removing, chipping away the marble or clay piece by piece so that work of art could emerge. It is said that once, in seeing a block of marble, he said, "In that block, there is an angel; I want to bring him out". And he sculpted the angel by removing all the rest. This image of Michelangelo's speaks also to us. Jesus is hidden in each one of us. We need to let him emerge by our loving and by removing whatever it is that blocks us from loving – whether it be attachments to ourselves or our satisfactions, unnecessary words or selfish attitudes.

Conclusion

Fasting is always put before us in the Christian life. But we shouldn't exaggerate its importance or consider it a major element of the Christian faith. The Catechism of the Catholic Church recalls in n. 1430: "Jesus' call to conversion and penance... does not aim first at outward works... but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion". Without interior conversion our external works such as fasting "remain sterile and false."

In Lent, fasting is never meant as something we do on its own. It is not to be separated from prayer and almsgiving as forms of Christian love. Each of us must decide in our heart and perhaps in consultation with others, what specific form of fasting we want to take on for Lent. And then, we need to persevere in our undertaking. But always in connection with our prayer and our generosity of giving in love for one another.

So, let us pray:

"Lord, as we set out on our Lenten journey, come to our aid. Grant us to live well the three pillars of this sacred season – Prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Help us to know how to empty ourselves so as to fill ourselves with your love as we deepen our love for one another."