

# FASTING

## (The Fifth Pillar of Catholic Spirituality)

In a world obsessed with pleasure this fifth pillar demonstrates the relevance of our spirituality more than any of the other spiritual disciplines. You and I were created to love and be loved, therefore, we **yearn** to love and be loved.

It is often said that in our present age there is a poverty of love. But what our author, Matthew Kelly, suggests is that our culture is not experiencing a poverty of love, but rather a poverty of **“other centered.”** *(Please note: Matthew Kelly uses the term – “self-possession” – but I prefer “other centered.” It makes more sense to me in this context. Catholics strive to be other centered, not self-centered.)* Our ability to love is directly linked to the level of **other centered** that we strive to achieve. In order to love, in order to put another before ourselves, we need to be able to center ourselves on others. The person who is not **other centered** thinks only of themselves and constantly places their desires before the needs of others. The very act of loving is an act of self-donation, of giving ourselves to another. **But in order to give ourselves, we must first center ourselves on the needs of others.** It is this **other-centered** that has been massively diminished by the hedonistic ideas of our culture. Broken relationships, soaring divorce rates, relationships that stay together only for convenience, and dysfunction even within the healthiest relationships, are just the symptoms. The disease is **not** being **“other centered.”**

All the spiritual disciplines that make up the incredible landscape of Catholic Spirituality are designed in one way or another to being **other centered** so that we can once again love God and neighbor, and be loved the way we were created to be loved.

### • In Search of a Vision

Our age is in search of an authentic vision of the human person. Are we just animals? Are we intelligent animals? Or are we children of God? Are we the result of evolution, a big bang, the loving hand of a creator – or some combination of these? Are we here to grasp as much pleasure as possible in our brief time or is there a higher calling and purpose to our lives? The way we live, love, work, vote, and participate in society is a direct result of the vision of the human person that we subscribe to.

Americans spend more than 30 billion dollars a year on diet products. That's more than the gross domestic product (GDP) of over fifty nations in the world. It seems to me the only diet most of us need is a little bit of **discipline**. But we don't want discipline. We want to simply take a little pill once a day, every day, so we can then eat whatever we want, whenever we want. We want someone to tell us if we buy some new piece of exercise equipment and workout on it for twenty minutes a day twice a week we'll quickly look like a supermodel. We want someone to tell us, "You can be healthy and happy without discipline!"

The truth is, you cannot become healthy and happy without discipline. In fact, if you want to measure the level of happiness in your life, just measure the level of discipline in your life. You will never have more happiness than you have discipline. The two are directly related to one another.

And this, of course, is where the great gulf appears between the Church and the culture. Our culture tells us, "You can be happy without discipline. Do whatever you feel like doing and you will be happy?" While the Church says, "You cannot be happy without discipline. In fact, discipline is the path to happiness!" Both messages promise happiness and yet they could not be more diametrically opposed. So which is it that will lead to the happiness we yearn for and were created for?

The message the Church conveys is a tough one to deliver. And yet, the Church consistently delivers this message of discipline because the Church is deeply rooted in the understanding of what is required for the human person to thrive and flourish. **Don't miss this: The Church has a vision of wholeness and holiness for the human person, and everything the Church does should help her members to become more perfectly who God created them to be.**

This vision of the human person is critical in our development as individuals, communities, nations, and the entire human family. **The reason is because our position on everything else flows from this vision of the human person.** Our position on health care, social security, education, human sexuality, the role of work, business, economics, and so many other things all flow from this primary vision we have about the purpose of man. The Church's message stands so counter to that of the present culture because the Church is driven by this incredible vision for the human person.

But when you ask, “What is the culture’s vision of the human person?” the silence is deafening. The culture doesn’t have a vision for the human person. So what drives today’s culture? **Consumption!**

And if the culture doesn’t have a vision for the human person, it certainly doesn’t have a **vision for the family**. In fact, the culture would prefer that every family be broken, because a broken family needs two dishwashers, two lawn mowers, and two of almost everything else. Even better if the culture could break families up two, three, or four ways. It would prefer that.

Today’s culture has no desire to help people become the-best-version-of-themselves and most people will not realize it until it is too late.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. Imagine a culture in which music and the arts celebrate the beauty of the human person and inspire people to explore all of their God-given potential. Imagine a culture in which lawmakers were less concerned with special interests and more concerned with creating a society that encouraged and actively helped people to become the-best-version-of-themselves. Imagine a culture in which all women, men, and children were educated not simply to perpetuate commerce, but in such a way as they came to understand who and what they are, who and what they are capable of becoming, and how they could use their talents and abilities to make a unique contribution to society. Imagine a culture where the gift of life was celebrated, embraced, valued, and protected for every human being from conception to natural death.

Such a culture, such a society, is possible!

### · **Body and Soul**

You are a delicate composition of body and soul. This is the essential makeup of the human person. Your body and soul are carefully linked by your will and intellect. Your body is temporal. One day it will die, be buried and decay. Your soul, however, is eternal. The body and soul are constantly vying for dominance – so which should steer the ship? Does it make sense for something that is temporal to lead something that is eternal? No! That which is eternal should lead and guide that which is temporal. But as much as that makes sense in the context of an intellectual discussion, you and I both know how easy it is to allow ourselves to be seduced by the things of this world.

There are many voices in our lives: family, friends, teachers, culture, art, history, books, media, movies, and of course in the midst of all these voices, deep within us is the **voice of conscience**. All these voices influence us at different times and to varying extents. But there is another voice that plays a powerful role in our lives – the voice of the body.

Your body has a voice and it talks to you constantly. You wake up, and the body cries out, “feed me,” so you eat. Later it cries out, “I’m thirsty,” so you drink. Still later, “I’m tired,” so you rest. When it’s time to exercise the body cries, “I don’t feel like it,” so you don’t. At the end of the day the body call out, “I’m ready for bed,” so you sleep. Whether we are aware of it or not, our body is ordering us around most of the day. It’s always crying out, feed me, sleep me, please me, pamper me, nourish me, wash me, relieve me, water me...

But where is this voice leading us? In this modern climate, most people’s bodies are winning the battle for dominance between body and soul. In a sense, the body is like money – a great servant, but a horrible master. Fasting is one of the ingenious practices that the Church teaches us to ensure the body does not become our master.

### · **The Death of Discipline**

We seem to want to avoid discipline at almost any cost. Far from seeing discipline as a friend in our quest to love and be loved, we treat discipline as a disease. The notion of freedom proclaimed by the modern world is anti-discipline. But true freedom cannot be separated from discipline.

An example of this paradox is in our cultural approach to dieting. For a long time the diet industry has been among the fastest growing industries in our economy. More and more diet products stock store shelves, while infomercials flood the airways. Diet programs claim to perform miracles, and yet, if you’ve been to the mall or beach lately, you can see that for the billions of dollars spent on such products & programs, we are still growing more and more overweight as a culture every year.

What is it that people are looking for in these diets and diet products? And why do so many people fail in their approach to dieting?

As I have observed, people want a diet that will allow them to eat whatever they want, whenever they want, and still allow them to look great, feel great, and lose that undesired extra weight. We want a miracle product or program that will remove the need for any discipline in our eating and exercise habits so that we can continue to indulge in the hedonistic ways that violate the-best-version-of-ourselves at every turn. Diets don't fail because the program wasn't any good. They don't fail because the products aren't any good. Diets fail because we lack the discipline to follow a program of eating and exercise that nurtures and promotes our maximum physical potential as a human being.

Moderation is the only diet most people need, but we seem to lack the inner strength to choose what is right, good, and true for us. We want what is good for us, but we lack the inner strength of will (Will Power or Discipline) to choose it. Men and women of every age have experienced this same difficulty. And this is one reason that for thousands of years men & women have been practicing a variety of spiritual exercises. One of the many benefits of these spiritual exercises is that they strengthen our will.

Fasting is a primary example of these spiritual exercises. Open your heart and mind. Set aside your prejudices and rediscover the genius of fasting, and how it can change your life.

### · **Fasting in the Scriptures**

For the Hebrews, fasting was infrequent and usually employed as a sign of repentance. The Torah required only one day of fasting each year: Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Four extra days were added much later, to commemorate the events leading to the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Israelites fasted at Samuel's urging, as they put away false gods and returned to Yehweh (cf. 1 Samuel 7:2-6). The entire Israelite army fasted as part of its preparation for battle (cf. Judges 20:26 and Chronicles 20:3-4). Daniel fasted as he prayed, asking God to grant him the ability to understand the Scriptures (cf. Daniel 9:3). At the urging of Jonah and to save the city of Nineveh, the King proclaimed a fast, calling on the people to abandon wrongdoings and violence (cf. Jonah 3:7-9)

In each case, fasting was used to humbly seek out God's will. Over and over, the Old Testament makes it abundantly clear that genuine fasting involves turning away from evil and turning back to God. Fasting that involves no such conversion of the heart is useless. Isaiah speaks out against fasting detached from conversion, announcing the worthlessness of fasting in the wrong spirit (cf. Isaiah 58: 3-7). The Scriptures continually remind us that external actions are insufficient; they must be joined to some internal conversion of the heart.

The New Testament also highlights the ancient spiritual practice of fasting, and the life and teachings of Jesus provide particular insight into its roles and meaning.

Before Jesus began his public life, he was "led by the Spirit into the desert, "where he fasted for forty days. (Matthew 4:1). Jesus didn't fast in atonement for his sins; he was sinless. He fasted in preparation for his mission. And the fact that Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the desert to fast is perhaps the greatest evidence we have that fasting is not merely a physical practice or another personal accomplishment; rather, it is a spiritual exercise.

In the desert, Jesus was tempted by the devil to abandon his fasting and have his fill. Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4) Fasting is a sharp reminder that there are more important things in life than food. Authentic Christian fasting helps to release us from our attachment to the things of this world. It is often these worldly attachments that prevent us from becoming the best-version-of-ourselves. Fasting also serves as a reminder that everything in this world is passing and thus encourages us to consider life beyond death. Go without food for several hours and you quickly realize how truly weak, fragile, and dependent we are. This knowledge of self strips away arrogance and fosters a loving acknowledgment of our utter dependence on God.

One of the prime purposes of fasting is to help us become aware of God's presence in our lives and in the world around us. Fasting also makes us aware of God's absence in different areas of our lives.

As with prayer and almsgiving, Jesus call us to remember that fasting is a spiritual exercise, and as such is primarily an action of the inner life. We do not fast to impress other people. We fast to cultivate the inner life. Fasting should be an occasion of joy, not a cause of sadness. Authentic fasting draws us nearer to God and opens our hearts to receive his many gifts.

It is important to note how different the reasons for fasting are from the reasons for dieting. Fasting is by its very nature a statement of humility, while dieting is usually linked to ego, vanity, and pride. It is also interesting to realize that the secular culture takes all things sacred and waters them down, ridicules them by adopting the opposite extreme, or separates them from their true meaning and purpose. Dieting is the secularization of the great spiritual exercise of fasting. But dieting is devoid of the strongest motives and reasons: repentance, self-denial, humility, self-mastery, will power, and the spiritual power that comes from these dispositions.

You are a delicate composition of body and soul. Fasting is to the body what prayer is to the soul. Indeed, fasting is the prayer of the body, and bodily fasting leads to spiritual feasting.

### **· The History of Christian Fasting**

After the death, Resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, fasting quickly became an integral part of Christian practice. At that time, several Jewish groups were fasting on Tuesdays and Thursdays. To distinguish their own practice, the first Christians fasted on Wednesday and Fridays. In the Judeo-Christian world, a fast day generally implied abstaining from food until the evening meal, which would be served after sundown.

Fasting was common among the early Christian communities in preparation for the sacraments, including the Eucharistic meal and baptism. In the case of adult baptism, both the baptizer and the one baptized would observe a fast in preparation.

In the fourth century, the Church began to regulate the practice of fasting, and since then, the practice has changed considerably at different junctures. In the Middle Ages, distinctions began to emerge regarding the amount and kind of food to be taken on fast day. It was at this time that it became a rule to abstain from meat, eggs, and dairy products on fast days.

The number of fast days gradually increased over the years, as the eves of major feast days and ember days were designated as fast days. And while the number of fast days was increasing, dispensations were being granted for a growing number of reasons. All this conspired to make the whole practice of

fasting more and more complex. These growing complexities tended to transform the practice of fasting into more of a legal matter than a spiritual practice, and moved the focus from inner transformation to outward display. The motive for fasting began to shift toward obligation and away from conversion and penance.

While there has been many changes in the practice of fasting over the centuries, the Church's understanding of it has remained consistent. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote of these three values of fasting: for the repression of one's concupiscence (strong desire) of the flesh, for the atonement of one's sins, and to better dispose oneself to higher things.

It is perhaps in the monasteries that the purpose and goals of fasting were preserved throughout the ages. Here it remained clear that the primary goal and purpose is union with God. It is this point that has been grossly under emphasized. This was largely due to the erroneous view that union with God was a reward reserved only for a few saints and mystics.

In the modern age, we have also seen many changes in the practice of fasting. Prior to 1917, Catholics were required to fast throughout Lent except on Sundays, taking only one meal per day. We were also expected to abstain from meat, eggs, and dairy products on all prescribed fast days, as well as every Friday and Saturday. By the early 1950's, fast days for Catholics in the U. S. consisted of one main meal and two small meatless meals.

In 1966, Pope Paul VI warned of the dangers of a legalistic approach to fasting and offered some new direction for the practice of fasting in the modern era in his [Apostolic Constitution on Penance](#). He reminded Catholics that the outward expression of fasting should always be accompanied by the inner attitude of conversion. In this document, Paul VI not only stressed the value of fasting and other forms of penance but also reminded Catholics everywhere of the importance the early Christians placed on linking the external act of fasting with inner conversion, prayer, and works of charity. In doing so, Paul VI echoed St. Augustine's idea: "Do you wish your prayer to fly toward God? Give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving." Having reasserted the value of fasting with prayer and charity as the "fundamental means of complying with the divine precepts of penance," Paul VI then simplified the regulations for fasting and abstinence and handed authority over to the local bishops' conferences to establish guidelines according to their culture.



Here in America, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral statement later that same year announcing, “Catholics in the U.S. are obliged to abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and on all Fridays during the season of Lent. They are also obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.” The pastoral statement encouraged the faithful to continue the traditional practice of Friday abstinence and also urged Catholics to perform works of charity in the spirit of penance, including visiting the sick and imprisoned, caring for the indigent, and giving alms to those in need. At the time, this was a radical shift that eliminated many of the old rules and regulations regarding fasting, abstinence, and penance. As a result, many Catholics felt they were no longer obliged to follow any specific penitential practices. Only a few were able to see the wisdom of the changes and realized that they were being called to a higher & deeper spirit of penitential conversion.

Despite the fact that many modern Catholics have abandoned penance and particularly fasting, at every level the Church continues to affirm the great value of these practices as a means for authentic spiritual growth. Throughout this modern era, popes and bishops have invited Catholics to fast and abstain, to pray and perform charitable works as time-tested ways of turning our attention toward God and the needs of our brothers and sisters. But amid the abundance and great wealth of advanced modern nations such as the United States, it is all too easy to be seduced into the self-absorbed lifestyles promoted by today’s popular culture.

Today, fasting is more popular in secular circles than it is among Catholics. Health enthusiasts are turning to periodic fasting for cures to everything from insomnia to cancer. Others are adopting this ancient spiritual practice to “cleanse” the body of impurities such as oxidants and the excess chemicals used to fertilize our food. Fasting has even found a place in many diet programs as a tool to achieve dramatic weight loss and proper weight maintenance.

Let us pray we can rediscover the value of this ancient spiritual practice as modern Catholics – not for God’s sake, but for our own sake. Our author, Matthew Kelly, is convinced that if we are to develop the inner freedom to resist the temptations that face us in this modern world, we must learn to assert the dominance of the spirit over the body, of the eternal over the temporal. If the spirit within each of us is to reign, then the body must first be tamed. Prayer won’t achieve this, works of charity won’t achieve this, and the power of the will won’t achieve it. This is the task for fasting, abstinence, and other acts of penance.

## · Lenten Fasting

There is great wisdom in the Christian practice of fasting. Though Christian fasting has been largely abandoned, the one expression of fasting (and penitential practice) that seems to have survived the turmoil of this modern era is that of Lenten penance. Although I suspect it is hanging on by a very thin cultural thread, which will break unless we can make people aware of the great beauty and spiritual significance of these acts.

Over and over in his books and talks, Matthew Kelly, reminds us that our lives change when our habits change. The Lenten experience is a perfect example of the Church's intimate understanding of the nature of the human person. The forty days of Lent are an ideal period for renewal. Lent is the perfect span of time to form new life-giving habits and abandon old self-destructive habits. But most of us just give up chocolate and when Easter arrives we are not much further advanced spiritually than we were at the beginning of Lent.

## · Fasting and You

Our faith seeks to integrate the relationship between body and soul. There is a war taking place within you. It is the constant battle between your body and soul. At every moment of the day, both are vying for dominance. If you wish to have a rich and abundant experience of life, you must allow your soul to soar. But in order to do that, you first need to tame and train the body. You cannot win this war once a week, once a year, or even once a day. From moment to moment, our desires need to be harnessed.

Fasting should be part of our everyday spirituality. For example, suppose you have a craving for a Coke, but you have a cranberry juice or glass of water instead. It is the smallest of things. Nobody notices. And yet, by this simple act you say no to the cravings of the body that seek to control you and assert the dominance of the soul. The will is strengthened and the soul is a little freer. In that one action you create an ounce of becoming **“other-centered.”**

Never leave a meal without practicing some form of fasting. When the body craves salt on your french fries, don't give in! It is these tiny acts that harness the

body as a worthy servant and strengthen the will for the great moments of decision that are part of each of our lives.

Beyond these small moments of fasting, we should seek more intense encounters with fasting and abstinence if we are serious about the spiritual life – not because it is in the catechism, but because it will help us turn away from sin and turn back to God, which is why it is in the catechism. Fasting helps us turn our backs on the-lesser-version-of-ourselves and embrace the best-version-of-ourselves.

Perhaps you can fast one day a week – two small meals, one full meal, and nothing to eat between meals. Perhaps you can fast one day a week on bread and water. Or maybe you can manage to give up coffee for a day. If that's too difficult why not try to give up coffee after 12 noon or for just two hours. Friday has long been a traditional day of fasting. Employ this tradition in your own way. Decide what is right for you. Abstain from eating meat on Fridays. Or fast from sugary treats or desserts on Friday.

Don't be prideful about it. Come humbly to God in prayer, and in the classroom of silence, decide upon some regular practice of fasting and/or abstinence. Then, from time to time, review this practice. If you feel called to add to it, add to it.

It is also important to recognize that not all forms of fasting involve food. You can fast from judging others, criticizing, cursing, or complaining, to name a few.

Two other powerful forms of fasting are the practice of silence and stillness. From time to time, fast from noise and movement. Sit perfectly still in silence for twenty minutes. It's not easy! This is perhaps why so many people never seriously adopt the habit of prayer. After you have become comfortable in silence, be still for twenty minutes. Be completely still. It's difficult. Yet silence and stillness are two of the greatest spiritual tools.

Fasting is a simple yet powerful way to turn toward God. If there is a question in your life, fast and ask God to lead you. He will. If you have a persistent sin that you just cannot seem to overcome, then fast. Some demons can only be cast out by prayer and fasting together.

Fasting is radically countercultural, but so is Christianity.

## ● The Universe and You

So far our author has avoided discussing the idea of fasting as a form of penance to reverse the effect of sin. This is because there is such a negative stigma with this idea in our modern world.

Even before kindergarten, we are taught the governing laws of the universe. One of these is the law of cause and effect: Every cause has an effect; every action has a reaction.

In a sense, the universe has a perfect accounting system. This is one tiny aspect of the wonder and perfection of God's creation. These laws are designed to help keep everything in balance and harmony. As a result, no debt in the universe goes unpaid. All debts must be settled.

This is where the link between penance and fasting emerges. We practice fasting as a form of penance not because we want to punish or destroy ourselves, but rather to express sorrow for our moral failings and to be restored to wholeness. The Church invites us to the spiritual practice of fasting not because she wants us to feel guilty or have a poor self-image, but rather so we can be liberated. In the process we are given grace to strive with even more determination to become the-best-version-of-ourselves.

It goes without saying that if you sit on a couch every day for ten years eating potato chips and drinking beer, the effects of those actions will be increased weight and poor health. In order to erase weight gained and return to optimum health, you would need to get off the couch, exercise and focus on eating foods that fuel the body with nourishment and energy. Neither of these is enjoyable at first, but they erase the effects of poor past actions that led you to become less than the-best-version-of-yourself.

The same is true spiritually. Every time we sin, it has an impact on our souls. Every word, thought, or action that betrays the-best-version-of-yourself also damages your relationship with God and neighbor. You can't see it, but it's there. When you sin, you not only damage your soul but you also increase your *tendency toward sin and your appetite for sin in the future.*

It is true that God forgives our sins through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but if the effects these sins have on our character and soul are to be reversed, some

form of penance will be required. Fasting is one spiritual practice that can help restore the soul to its intended beauty, reduce our tendency toward those actions that are self-destructive and sinful, and reduce our appetite for sin in the future.

### ● Always a Means, Never an End

Fasting is a means, never an end. The purpose of fasting is to assist the soul in turning back to God. The benefits of fasting are innumerable, but all these benefits are secondary to the desire to embrace God more fully in our lives.

Whatever form of fasting you decide to employ in your life, you will have good days and bad days. You will have successes and failures. Stick to it. Don't give up. If you fail, try again.

The spiritual journey is not made a mile at a time. More often than not, the advances in the journey are too small even to measure. But they all add up to a lifetime of joy-filled challenges and an eternity in union with God and everything that is good, true, beautiful and noble. Our bodies are vehicles that God has given our souls to experience life in the material realm. Until we get a grip on our bodies, we will never get a grip on life. Until we learn to reign over our bodies we never really experience all that life can be.