

Ash Wednesday
February 18, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

On Sunday, in preparation for the beginning of Lent, I talked to you about the importance of adopting an additional spiritual discipline, such as visiting the sick, during these forty days of penitence and fasting. Today I'm going to talk to you about fasting itself, why we do it and the benefits that we derive from it. It's an important topic because, as you probably know, fasting and abstinence in Lent are required of all Catholics roughly from the time they are teenagers until just before retirement age.

If we think first, as we should, about giving glory to God, we see that the discipline of fasting helps us to grow in the virtue of self-control. When we intentionally abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent or fast from a particular pleasure throughout the season, we develop the habit of not simply following our impulses. We demonstrate that we are not ruled by our passions but by our conscience, which, if it is well formed, will help us to determine the right course of action. We do not simply do what comes naturally or what is immediately attractive to us, but rather what we should do, what God wills.

We give glory to God also insofar as we become oriented towards sharing. That is, if we consume less through fasting, that means inevitably that there is more for us to give to those who have less. Fasting that gives glory to God takes what we don't consume and gives it away; it does not store it up so we may engage ourselves when the fast is over. To engage in this latter practice would be directly contrary to the words of Jesus we heard in today's Gospel; it would be to look for an earthly reward, something to our honor and glory, rather than being solely devoted to the Lord. In any case, whatever self-discipline and sharing with the less fortunate we practice, we do not draw attention to it, lest we run afoul of the Lord's command and end up pointing at ourselves instead of pointing to our heavenly Father.

Second, we look to how fasting benefits our neighbors. If we fast according to the precepts of the Church, it should cause us an element of discomfort and, depending on the personal discipline we undertake, could allow us to enter into suffering. Our suffering, united to Jesus' own upon the altar of the Cross, makes reparation for sin and is a participation in the redemption of the world. An analogy from parenthood will help us understand the spiritual implication: as parents we continually, daily give up the things we desire in order that our children may be provided for. From material benefits to time spent with them, the sacrifices that we make, that only we and God know we make, benefit the other, in this case, our children. The same is true in the spiritual realm: the sacrifices we make, the deprivations we suffer, benefit those to whom we apply them, so long as they are undertaken consciously united to the suffering of Jesus upon the cross.

Therefore, apply your fast to the benefit of those you love, whether it be your immediate family members or the suffering souls in purgatory whom you will not meet until the Last Day. Whomever you choose, your good deeds should not be advertised. In the same way we do not remind our

children every day of the sacrifices we make for them, so we do not throw in the face of our loved ones how much we are suffering during Lent for their conversion and to make reparation for the sins they've committed. Keeping our intention between God and ourselves makes it abundantly clear that we truly desire the good of our neighbors and not ourselves.

Lastly, we look at how fasting benefits us. When we fast, we feel it. Therefore, we are reminded moment by moment that we are ultimately dependent not upon the things we rely on to survive, our food, our clothing, our shelter. We are finally dependent upon God, Whose sacrifice upon the altar of the Cross sought to save not only our mortal bodies, but also our eternal souls. Likewise, the things of this earth give us a degree of happiness, as we give thanks that our material needs are met; but fasting reminds us that these material things, important as they are, cannot save us. Our eternal happiness depends upon the Lord Who feeds us with the Bread of Life and the Chalice of everlasting salvation. The hunger we feel prompts us to meditate upon the Body and Blood of Christ, without which we cannot have eternal life, as is made so clear in John chapter 6. Thus, this temporal hunger inspires us to pray, which opens us to God's call to the Eucharistic Feast.

Naturally, this will benefit us only if it is undertaken with this eternal goal in mind. If we fast to receive the fleeting praise of men, our faulty focus prevents us from gazing upon our eternal reward. We wash our faces and anoint ourselves precisely so that we don't get praised by others for our piety and thus get distracted from what should be our goal.

If we fast truly to the glory of God and for the benefit of our neighbors, with an eye toward the redemption of our own souls, we truly enter into the imitation of Christ. After all, the forty days of fasting that we observe here and now are modeled upon the forty days Jesus Himself undertook in the wilderness. And his fasting, you will recall, was undertaken in secret. He was alone, but the deprivations He voluntarily offered prepared Him for the suffering of His Passion, while at the same time giving glory to God and benefitting His brothers and sisters in the Faith.

Therefore, even as we look to the reward we hope to receive in heaven, we must also acknowledge that voluntarily fasting does not only prepare us for eternal life. Fasting also helps us to confront the trials and deprivations we don't volunteer to undertake. Fasting disciplines us so that we, like Jesus Himself, are ready to carry the cross we all must bear if we are also to be glorified with Him Who first bore His cross for us.