

POPE BENEDICT ON LENT 2009

The following are excerpts from the Message of Pope Benedict XVI for Lent of 2009. I hope they are helpful for you.

For this year's Lenten Message, I wish to focus my reflections especially on the value and meaning of fasting.

We might wonder what value and meaning there is for us Christians in depriving ourselves of something that in itself is good and useful for our bodily sustenance. The Sacred Scriptures and the entire Christian tradition teach that fasting is a great help to avoid sin and all that leads to it.

...the people of Nineveh, responding to Jonah's call to repentance, proclaimed a fast, as a sign of their sincerity, saying: "Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?" (3:9). In this instance, too, God saw their works and spared them.

In the New Testament, Jesus brings to light the profound motive for fasting... True fasting, as the divine Master repeats elsewhere, is... to do the will of the Heavenly Father... The true fast is thus directed to eating the "true food," which is to do the Father's will (cf. Jn. 4:34). If, therefore, Adam disobeyed the Lord's command "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat," the believer, through fasting, intends to submit himself humbly to God, trusting in His goodness and mercy.

Saint Peter Chrysologus writes: "Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy the lifeblood of fasting. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy..."

In our own day, 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. ...but for believers, it is, in the first place, a "therapy" to heal all that prevents them from conformity to the will of God.

The faithful practice of fasting contributes, moreover, to conferring unity to the whole person, body and soul... Saint Augustine, who knew all too well his own negative impulses... writes: "I will certainly impose privation... to be pleasing in [God's] eyes, and I may enjoy his delightfulness" (*Sermon* 400, 3,3)... Through fasting and praying, we allow Him to come and satisfy the deepest hunger that we experience in the depths of our being: the hunger and thirst for God.

At the same time, fasting is an aid to open our eyes to the situation in which so many of our brothers and sisters live.... 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. It is precisely to keep alive this welcoming and attentive attitude towards our brothers and sisters that I encourage the parishes... to intensify in Lent the custom of private and communal fasts, joined to the reading of the Word of God, prayer and almsgiving.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is good to see how the ultimate goal of fasting is to help each one of us, as the Servant of God Pope John Paul II wrote, to make the complete gift of self to God (cf. Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 21). With these wishes, while assuring every believer and ecclesial community of my prayer for a fruitful Lenten journey, I cordially impart to all of you my Apostolic Blessing.