

SPIRITUAL BON APPÉTIT: PRAYING ON AN EMPTY STOMACH

As an 18-year-old who enjoyed a chocolate milkshake every single night, you shouldn't be shocked by my revelation that I was not naturally attracted to asceticism. Far from it in fact, though I have never been known to have a voracious appetite. I simply could not see a connection between my spiritual life and certain bodily penances. Years later, I think much differently and in large part due to a greater appreciation for history and how **fasting and abstinence** developed to a degree of prominence in the Church. It is not as simple a history as you might think. It is also true that I no longer could enjoy that milkshake without significant repercussions—I do not weigh 130 pounds anymore!

Fasting has a venerable pedigree in the Church, though not without its controversy. In the earliest centuries, some who “pushed” fasting too enthusiastically were viewed with suspicion, their motives questioned. A heretical sect hailing from the Iberian Peninsula (Roman Hispania) called the **Priscillianists**, even insisted that Jesus was a vegetarian! What? Talk about coming out of left field. In a vision to Peter, Jesus declared **all foods** to be **clean**, including animals (see Acts 10:10-15). The Last Supper immediately comes to mind, though I am aware that scholars have argued interminably whether the Last Supper was a Passover, during which Lamb was consumed. Whether the trial before Pilate and the crucifixion would have been permissible on Passover, an important Jewish feast day, is questionable. John's chronology appears to preclude this possibility, the trial taking place on the “day of preparation.”

Fasting and abstinence from meat have a solid scriptural basis, not to mention numerous examples in the writings of the early Fathers. Most likely, Christians began to abstain from meat due to some animals' connection with false gods. For example, the early document, *The Didache* (96 A.D.) cautions: “But as for food, bear what you can; but keep strictly from that which is offered to idols, for it is the worship of dead gods. (VI, 3) More positively, fasting **nourishes prayer**, obtains pardon, conquers evil (Tertullian) and strengthens one's ability to **control one's passions**. If we are able to resist every urge to eat, we too will be strengthened to avoid the temptations of other, even sinful, passions. Mortification of the flesh (including fasting) is an experience of freedom (Origen). So why do we experience it otherwise? We moderns are accustomed to having everything ready-made at our fingertips. When is the last time you have eaten a cake or pie baked from scratch? Grocery stores are filled with ready-made meals (with a steep price tag), so that even cooking is no longer a necessity.

Early Christians zeroed in on two days in which fasting had some theological significance: **Wednesdays and Fridays**. The choice of Friday was obvious, due to its connection to the crucifixion, but Wednesdays were added because it was presumably the day of Jesus' betrayal to the authorities. But early traditions varied widely. **St. Augustine of Hippo** was aware of varying customs and never felt that one size fits all with respect to fasting. One ought to fast as the local church fasts, he believed. When in Hippo, do as the Hipponensians do! For him, fasting had two basic functions: (1) ascetical—subjugating our inordinate desires, strengthening them against the dangers of illicit pleasures; (2) spiritual—it enriches the mind. Those who fast attain a “spiritual delight in truth and wisdom.” (cf. *Sermon* 210.3.4).

Hmmn, let's “flesh” that out a bit (sorry!). Think about it...after a large meal, are you in your best frame of mind to think, to write, to ponder, or are you perhaps more inclined towards a nap? Many would argue the latter, at which point Augustine may have been on to something. In 2006, researchers at **Yale Medical School** injected mice with **ghrelin**, a hormone produced on an empty stomach that registers hunger in the brain. They put the mice through a maze and other “intelligence” tests, along with those lacking the extra hormone. They found that ghrelin was binding also in the region of the brain that plays a role in learning. Guess who performed better? The **hungry** mice! Fasting might just help you to pray more attentively.

Fasting during Lent is a salutary practice, and one I heartily endorse, even as I naturally resist it. I am a nibbler, and on those days when I **eschew nibbling** (couldn't resist!), I feel it. I sense it, and I am aware of the minor hunger pangs. This keeps me **focused on other areas**, mindful of the reason for the mild sacrifice. Fasting appears to have been legislated as early as the 3rd century in some places. The oldest Easter fast was limited to

Good Friday but later extended to Holy Saturday; some even practiced a forty hour fast in the early Church in imitation of the forty hours Jesus was in the tomb. So too a fast before the Eucharist— the oldest mention of such a fast before Communion dates back to the 3rd century. St. Leo the Great dedicated **thirty treatises** to fasting: “The abstinence of him who fasts becomes the nourishment of the poor.” (*Sermon 13,1*) The ancients were wise— may we learn from their example this Lent.

- I applaud Pope Francis’ decision to open up to scholars the **Vatican Secret Archives** from the period of the pontificate of Pope Pius XII (1939-58). This has been in the works for 13 years, as cataloguing material is a monumental task. I have long felt that the wartime pontiff was unfairly criticized for his actions (or inaction) during World War II, while also acknowledging that it is an extremely complicated issue. May reputable scholars using established historical methods bring some light to this period of the Church’s history.
- I was delighted by the **creativity** of two recent Catholic **marriage proposals**. Last week, with musicians surreptitiously waiting in the wings, one man popped the question at our Communion rail, after daily Mass goers had filed out. He sent me a great photo of the couple outside on the steps, as the snow fell. Another conducted a scavenger hunt, with the penultimate stop being the Cathedral. They prayed before proceeding to the last stop for his proposal. Both women said yes! We were honored to play a part. Congratulations!
- It’s not too late to make your Lenten resolutions. **Don’t delay!** Consider **attending weekday Mass** (at least 2-3 times per week) and/or Stations of the Cross. See sidebar for Lenten Fasting regulations.
- While there are many questions surrounding the new Vatican accord with China, it is positive news that nearly **50,000 Catholic baptisms** occurred last year. The first Catholic Church was established in 1294 A.D. by an Italian Franciscan, and the Church further developed under the Jesuit missionaries of the 16th century.
- In last week’s homily I reflected briefly upon my first “real” job at a local drug store. I did some research— I received \$2.90 per hour, minimum wage that year. That is equivalent to \$8.86 in 2019, still \$1.00 less per hour than Saint Paul’s minimum wage today. Minimum wage will rise to \$15.00 by 2022. Is it **too late** to ask for back pay?

Sincerely in Christ,

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Rector