

The Navigator



The Newsletter of the Monastic Fellowship of Saint Brendan's

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A Disciplined Faith: Fasting

Fr. Alan Andraeas, Prior

*"Therefore also now," saith the LORD,
"turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting,..."*
Joel 2:12

We've all been there: a crucial time or hardship in our lives where we would do *anything* to gain a few extra 'points' with God. The typical solution for most folks usually involves some kind of 'bargaining' with the Lord—promises to perform all kinds of special behaviors to gain His favor (e.g., more Scripture reading, actual tithes in the offering plate, more prayer time, and...fasting). And, without fail, heaven meets us with silence because—if we were truly honest with ourselves—these are the things we should be doing anyway. Right?

So far in this series on Saint Brendan's *Rule of Life* we've examined the interior spiritual disciplines of meditation and prayer. In this article we turn our attention to fasting. Fasting is perhaps the most 'interior' discipline of them all because our bodies are keenly proactive in letting us know when they're not happy. You can assume an aura of prayer and meditation for the sake of others even when you fail to authentically practice them, but the sound of a grumbling stomach at an awkward (by that I mean, public) moment is very hard to silence. And yet fasting is one of those disciplines to which the Bible most frequently calls us...and the discipline we most routinely neglect.

Fasting is an ancient Judeo-Christian discipline that we need to reclaim for our spiritual strengthening. Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Anna, Paul, and especially Jesus stand as our biblical examples of those who frequently sought out the discipline and blessings of fasting. Church history is also full of exemplary leaders who understood the demand and value of this God-ordained practice. Examples of these people not only include monastics and hermits across the centuries, but Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Finney.



We all have a sense of what fasting entails. It comes for many of us at the direction of doctor as preparation for a blood draw or surgical procedure. For others it's a way of detoxing our bodies or part of a new diet trend. For others, still, it's the 'remedy of choice' we use the morning after an all-you-can-eat buffet in order to relieve the after effects of an overly taxed digestive system. Yep, we've all been there. But none of these should ever be confused with biblical fasting.

In a Christian setting, fasting means to abstain from food for spiritual purposes. It is not health related (although it does provide healthy side benefits) or a tool for dieting or quick weight loss; nor is it a kind of legal leverage that forces God into a certain direction. Rather, it's an agent for the mortification for our insatiably satiated urges—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. It is a demonstration to heaven and a declaration to hell (and even more often to ourselves) that what truly sustains us comes from

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God alone (John 4:32). And most of all, fasting is the most effective way God has of unveiling and revealing those enemy strongholds that control us (e.g., gluttony, emptiness, boredom, hedonism, self-loathing, fear, etc.). We could take weeks on this one aspect of fasting alone, but that is not our purpose in this brief article.

Scripture contains examples of three different kinds of fasting:

- Abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water (cf. Luke 4:2).
- A restriction from certain kinds of food but not total abstinence (cf., Daniel 10:3).
- The absolute fast which abstains from all food and drink (Esther 4:16). Please note that absolute fasts should only be undertaken at the explicit direction of the Lord and should only be set upon for a limited number days, and only practiced after other types of fasts have become successfully routine.

It may actually come as a surprise that the Bible does not give specific guidance on how often one should fast, simply that it is a part of authentic faith. The earliest believers understood that fasting was a part of their duty and they knew how to do it because it was a regular part of their Jewish heritage. Thus the Scriptures are silent on many of those things for which we now desire a measure of instruction. However, one of the earliest documented set of Christian 'rules'—the *Didache* (written as early as 60 AD prior to half of the epistles and quoted at the time as Scripture by Clement of Alexandria)—calls for Christians to fast every Wednesday and Friday. John Wesley (1703-1791) felt so strongly about this practice that he would even refuse to ordain clergy into Methodist ministry if they failed to fast on those two days every week.

Since the finger of God didn't carve any hard and fast rules about fasting into rock tablets the way He did with the 10 Com-

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mandments (cf. Exodus 31:18; 32:16; 34:1), we must not consider this as some kind of silent permission to avoid fasting. Rather, what we're faced with is a biblical freedom in Christ to fast as often as we are led. We are free to be like St. Paul who engaged “**in fastings often**” (2 Corinthians 11:27). We are certainly to be mindful of the two great traditional fast days of the Church calendar—Ash Wednesday and Good Friday—and the oblates of the Monastic Fellowship of Saint Brendan's are encouraged to fast on those two days as a part of their personal discipline.

That should be considered as our absolute minimum. It should be the growing desire of every oblate, however, to practice a manner of suitable fasting where, with the Holy Spirit's leading, even weekly fasting becomes the norm; not as an activity of law but as a gift of joy given to God so that, with Anna the Prophetess, we might be found “**worshiping with fasting**” (Luke 2:37).

All of this is still a rather mechanical aspect of fasting—*kind* and *quantity* is important, but not all-important. Even more important is what we should be doing while fasting. I'm not talking about sitting in sackcloth and ashes so every-

one can see that you're fasting or maintaining good grooming so that no one can tell that you're fasting (cf. Matthew 6:17-18). It goes much deeper than that. Fasting is a religious discipline so there must be a component of faith at the heart of it. I think Isaiah 58:1-12 is a good place to start. Read it. Now. (Go ahead, I'll wait for you.)



MONASTIC MUSE

muse \ 'myüz \ 1: *vb* to turn something over in the mind meditatively, 2: to think reflectively, 3: *n* a state of deep thought...

**True fasting consists not only in overcoming the flesh,
but in taking that piece of bread which you would like to eat your self,
and giving it instead to one who is hungry.**

—St. Seraphim of Sarov, Russian monk and mystic, 1759/1833

Interesting, isn't it? Our fasting should actually be a catalyst for those things that allow the hands of Christ to work through us: to loosen chains, untie the yoke, free the oppressed, feed the hungry, provide shelter, and clothe the naked. Fasting is more than an exercise in humility and self-mortification. It is that, to be sure; but as God says, **"Is it only a day for a man to humble himself,...or bowing one's head,...or lying in sackcloth and ashes?"** (Isaiah 58:5). Fasting is a call to move beyond our own comfort and tend to those who are without comfort; and if we're faithful to act as the incarnation of Christ to others, then with Christ we'll be able to say, **"I have food to eat that you know nothing about"** (John 4:32).

Another side benefit of fasting (if I dare call it that), is the promise of spiritual authority in times of demonic encounter. While there aren't demons behind every tree, there are certainly some demons behind some trees and there are instances when we need every tool at our disposal to gain the high

ground. Fasting coupled with prayer is one of those tools (Matthew 17:21).

There are many other things we can say about fasting—how it helps us to better hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, how it equips us for personal ministry, how it can bring us to a place of deeper prayer and intercession, etc.—but I'll leave that for your own personal study of the Scripture. For now, just believe me that a fast is more than a "four letter word" (although many contemporary Christians rank fasting in the same category as a root canal). It is an expectation enjoined upon every believer and the Church has been remiss in failing to teach its members about this beautiful jewel of the spiritual disciplines. In the next article we'll examine the last of the interior disciplines: study. ✕

Rejoice!
Fr. Alan Andraeas

Fasting Food

Sue Andraeas, Prioress

"When you fast..."
Matthew 6:16

Do you know what I think? I think that the ability to have too much makes us unable to be content with enough. It's true with just about everything, but it is especially true with food. Isn't it easier to choose what to make for dinner if you only have a few choices? Or one choice? Do you know what else I think? I think that fasting is the toughest discipline for most of us to come to grips with because we DO have so many choices, and we are taught that we are entitled to have whatever we want, to 'have it our way,' to have it now, and to have someone else do the work. If all we could have, each day, was a bowl of rice, some salad, and occasionally some meat—and that's it—we'd stop obsessing over food. But, at least here in America, most of us can easily have way too much, even those of us on a rather tight budget. Let's look briefly at a familiar parable, and then we'll talk some more.

Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And

they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Matthew 14: 19-21

I'm sure most of you recognize that portion of Matthew's Gospel as the recounting of the time Jesus fed a crowd of people just after the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. Jesus had, in his grief, escaped by boat for some time alone with his Father. When the boat landed, he saw that the crowd had raced around the water to meet him there. He 'had compassion on them,' Matthew tells us, 'and healed their sick' (Matt. 14: 13-



21). Now, I don't know how many times you've heard this story, or how often you've meditated on what it must have been like, but my guess is that we do not, as citizens of 21st century civilization, grasp the whole scene. Let's look at it again, because our personal response in a similar situation would reveal much about the depth of our spiritual life of surrender.

First of all, let's compare this scene to one of similar size today. If we were going to a healing service of this magnitude, it would probably be inside a building; at best there would be upholstered seats in a climate-controlled auditorium, at worst it would be folding chairs in a tent. There would probably be music, and ushers to direct and 'organize' the healings in an orderly fashion. By evening, there would be either lights in the auditorium or at least lanterns in the tent. And it would happen in a place that was both accessible to the public (the auditorium would have wheelchair ramps, etc.) and convenient. I mean you've got to find a place for 8,000-10,000 people to gather. Think of the parking! Back to Jesus and his healing ser-

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know I’m right, and you know that some of those very questions would probably cross your mind, the whole scenario becomes funny. Embarrassingly so. Would you be content at an all-you-can-eat buffet that offered only two items? No wonder Jesus has such a hard time working miracles in our day.

vice. No auditorium, no upholstery, no tent, no lights, no music, no ushers, no parking lot. No ramps, no nothing! This is a remote area and somehow this whole throng of sick, crippled, oppressed people got here before Jesus’ boat!! (Ever think about that?) When he steps out of his boat, there is no order, no ‘healing line,’ no bulletin or liturgy to tell people what’s going to happen next; it must have been total chaos! I’m imagining just the area where all the donkeys are ‘parked!’ (Ever think about THAT?) There are very sick people lying motionless on blankets where the blind and demon possessed are wandering about, plus children running all over the place (and mothers running after them reminding them to be careful where they step. Well. There’s all those people and not a single portapotty in sight. Ever think about THAT???) It doesn’t say Jesus healed a few of them. It

says he healed ‘their sick.’ All of them! Now, think for a moment what 8,000-10,000 people with a crowd-sized ‘high’ caused by the miraculous events of this day would be like. Whatever food they brought with them was eaten on the way or much earlier in the day. The disciples ‘suggest’ that sending them off would be a good plan. The adrenaline rush alone could carry them home, and nobody but the babies would have to be carried this time, right? But here’s where we get to the crux of our story. Jesus feeds them. Well, first he tells them to sit on the trampled-down grass. How long do you think it took him to get their attention with no P.A. system? (This is nearly miraculous in itself.) He takes a few loaves of bread and a few fish, thanks his Father for them, breaks them up and gives them to the disciples to distribute. Back to our auditorium and/or tent...

What do you think would happen if, during our orderly, civilized healing service, the pastor or priest would be given a few fish and some bread, offer grace, and give it to the ushers to distribute? I can hear it now: “Do you have any tartar sauce? Butter?” “I need a napkin—and a plate!” “I want mine super-sized.” “Is this white or wheat because I only eat wheat.” “I need gluten-free.” “May I have a glass of water too please?” “Oh, I couldn’t; I’m a vegetarian.” “Where’s the slaw and fries!” “Do you have a license to make this food? And where can I wash my hands?” You’re smiling, aren’t you? Because you

Fasting, like all other spiritual disciplines, is like a multi-vitamin, so to speak. Your daily vitamin tablet does you no good if the rest of your diet is fast food burgers and fries. But taken as part of a deliberate, intentional diet of healthy food in healthy amounts, it helps ‘fill in the gaps’ where they may be missing nutrients. But if you take your vitamin so that you ‘feel better’

about your junk food diet, the vitamin can do more harm than good because it will blind you to the overall problem. Or compare spiritual disciplines to exercise. You can’t go for a 10 mile run one day and expect it to make up for several weeks of sloth. You’ll certainly not feel better! That’s the problem with compartmentalizing spiritual disciplines from the rest of our life, focusing on the discipline rather than the life-changing effect the Lord intends it to have. All the disciplines are designed to work that way: a specific act that is

intended to transform every second of every day. Prayer is difficult if you’ve been ‘plugged in’ to the voices in your cell phone, iPad, TV, etc. all day. Meditation upon Scripture is difficult if your daily reading consists mainly of soundbite news, blogs, tweets, chats and shallow-ly written fiction. Fasting is difficult if your regular diet is junk and too much of it.

Here’s some pragmatic suggestions for you if you would like to add fasting to your disciplined spiritual life—as you should! The very first thing you need to do is take an honest look at what you DO eat. Which food items are you addicted to—and I mean



HOW TO CONTACT US

Father Alan L. Andraeas, Prior
Mother Susan G. Andraeas, Prioress

The Monastic Fellowship of Saint Brendan’s
38 Cemetary Road
Dennysville, ME 04628-4326
207-726-5129

st.brendans@myfairpoint.net (please note change)
www.saintbrendans-online.org



seriously. Sugar? Carbs? That daily latte? “Addiction” is the clinical term for what God calls an idol. (Ouch!) As tough as it is, you need to repent and break the addiction, and “cold turkey” may work best, or it may be the worst; you’ll have to figure that part out through prayer, perhaps with

your doctor’s help. Next, begin to wean yourself from all ‘food’ that is not food, those things that do more harm than good once ingested. This is the second type of fast on Fr. Alan’s list on page 2. Here’s the short list: hydrogenated fats, high fructose corn syrup, MSG, artificial sweeteners. Pick one. Read ALL the labels of ALL you eat and allow yourself one ‘cheat’ purchase per week until your body has detoxed from that ingredient—then choose another. Know that once you get it out of your system, your body may react strongly if you try to go back. It’s supposed to!! (Alan and I both have a great deal of

trouble eating grocery store or restaurant beef since we’ve been getting pasture-fed, non-drugged beef from a local farmer. I’m asked why we’d want to give up the fun of eating a steak or burger in a restaurant ‘just to avoid the bad stuff in the meat.’ Think about it! Jesus lives in me, and I don’t want to give him tainted, ‘unclean’ meat!) Finally, look at how much you eat versus how much you actually need. “Enough” gives us fuel and energy. “Too much” makes our body work overtime trying to digest, store and ‘trash’ the excess, making us fatigued and unable to sleep at the same time.

Spring is a good time to take a serious look at our eating habits. Jesus did not say ‘IF’ you fast, but ‘WHEN’ you fast. It’s not an option. Our best plan is eat [real] food; eat less; eat plants. I stole that from popular author Michael Pollen, by the way. If you want to learn some alarming things about the typical American diet—and how to fix it—I suggest you read his book *In Defense of Food*. It isn’t a Christian book, not directly, but it can help move us toward the ability to break free from food idolatry.

Sue Andraeas

The Final Word: Peter Chrysologus

“The Golden-Worded”—Bishop of Ravenna, Italy (c. 380-450 AD)

Fasting is the soul of prayer and mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. Let no one try to separate them; they cannot be separated. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others.

When you fast, see the fasting of others. If you want God to know that you are hungry, know that another is hungry. If you hope for mercy, show mercy. If you ask for yourself what you deny to others, your fasting is a mockery.

Offer your soul to God; make to Him an oblation of your fasting, so that your soul may be a pure offering, a holy sacrifice, a living victim, remaining your own and at the same time made over to God. Whoever fails to give this to God will not be excused, for if you are to give Him yourself you are never without the means of giving.

To make your fast-offering acceptable, mercy must be added. Fasting bears no fruit unless it is watered by mercy. Fasting dries up when mercy dries up. Mercy is to fasting as rain is to the earth. However much you may cultivate your heart, clear the soil of your nature, root out vices, sow virtues. If you do not release the springs of mercy, your fasting will bear no fruit.

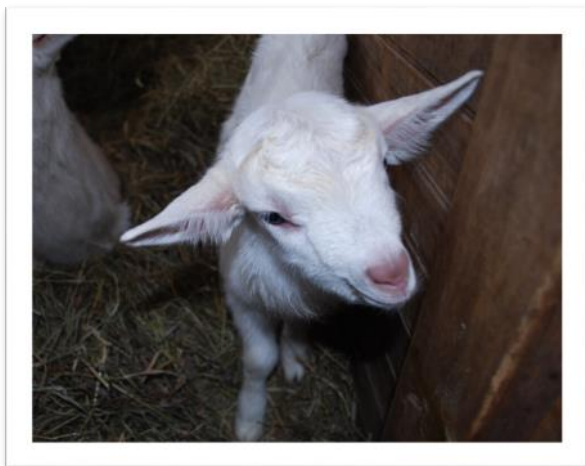
When you fast, if your mercy is thin your harvest will be thin; when you fast, what you pour out in mercy overflows into your barn. Therefore, do not lose by hoarding, but gather in by scattering. Give to the poor, and you give to yourself. God will not allow you keep what you have refused to give to others.



Then grant us, Lord, like them to be /
Full oft in fast and prayer with Thee.

“The Glory of These Forty Days”—6th century Latin hymn text for Lent

Life at the Priory House



TOP LEFT: Fr. Alan and Sue were invited to the Maine State House in Augusta where he was asked to open the legislative session in prayer. Here they visit the gallery of the House Chamber. **TOP RIGHT:** This was the winter of “snow upon snow.” Sue looks out the window as snow presses against the side of the house. The total snow fall for this winter reached 17 feet! **MIDDLE LEFT:** Fr. Alan stands with his new double bass; he’ll be playing it in the local Passamaquoddy Bay Symphony Orchestra (the last time he played was in 11th grade!). **MIDDLE RIGHT:** A sure sign of spring: baby goats! Sue brings Nara—only four hours old—up to the “goat nursery” in the big barn. **BOTTOM LEFT:** This handsome young buckling is named Murphy; he’s also just several hours old! **BOTTOM RIGHT:** While baby goats are a sign of spring, the vegetable garden is a whole different story. This photo of the garden gate was taken today, April 9th. The garden is STILL buried under three feet of snow (and in some places, even more!).



Prayers and Sympathy

Please lift up the family of Helene Thatcher (Long Island, NY) as we commend her soul into the loving hands of God. Helene was an original member of our Fellowship. May she know the eternal joys of heaven as she and Jesus look upon each other, face-to-face.



Monastic Fellowship of Saint Brendan's
38 Cemetery Road
Dennysville, ME 04628-4326

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