

"Feasting and Fasting"

Homily of March 2, 2003

by Fr. Brian Joyce

We have Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday. We have Carnival and Lent. We have celebrating the Alleluia and also burying it. Now, most of you aren't old enough, but those few of us that are can remember a day and age when fasting and giving up things was practically the identity of being a Catholic. You could have people who were in the Mafia and were Robber Barons and were Segregationists and maybe even a hit man seven days a week, who would still proudly announce, "I'm a good Catholic. I never eat meat on Friday."

About thirty years ago, on a chilly March evening, on the upper west side of New York, a priest was waiting for the bus to come along, and he had his overcoat pulled up tight around his throat to keep warm, when out of the shadows came a man with a gun, and pointed it at him and said, "I want your wallet." When the priest opened his coat to give him his wallet, the man saw his Roman collar, and said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Father. I wouldn't rob you. I'm a Catholic."It gets worse.... The priest decided maybe he could bring the man back to the straight and narrow and began chatting with him, and, as was the custom thirty years ago, pulled out a cigarette and lit it and offered the robber a cigarette. The man said, "Oh, no, Father. I've given up smoking for Lent."

Ancient Egyptians fasted to look younger, and ancient Greeks fasted to be more mentally alert, and American Indians fasted to show courage, and Russian Icon painters would fast before they went to work so that they would paint better. Almost every world religion has had an honored place for fasting. In fact, legend tells us that Buddha fasted so much that he was so thin that he could touch his backbone by pressing against his stomach.

In a popular book about ten years ago, called "Fasting, the Ultimate Diet," the doctor who wrote the book said, "It's amazing but fasting even for long term does not have much harm, but great benefits." He used two examples. He said, "After the Second World War, there were large numbers of Japanese soldiers who did not know the war was over and spent up to thirty years in the jungles in the Philippines. When they finally came home, because of their very limited diet and great fasting, they were in better health than their countrymen."

The second example he gives is Great Britain during the Second World War, which, for them, was five or six years. There was severe rationing, and a very limited diet. When the war was over, and they returned to a fuller diet and fuller meals, national health went down and all kinds of ailments that had disappeared and not existed for six years began to appear again. But for believers, fasting is not about calories and it's not about

losing weight. In fact, it's not even about discipline or about self-sacrifice.

Our fasting is about two things. Number one, it is about solidarity with the poor, at least for a moment, putting our feet in the same shoes as the hungry people of the world, except many of them do not even have shoes. Solidarity with the poor.... The prophet Isaiah, in the Hebrew scriptures, speaking for God, says, "This is the fast that I want, to loose the bonds of injustice, to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house. And then, in the New Testament, we know that one out of ten lines in the whole New Testament is about the poor and our call to stand in solidarity with them. And in Luke's gospel, it is one out of six lines. So, one reason for fasting is, just for a moment, to be reminded of our solidarity with the hungry of the world.

The second reason is not about calories. It is about values, that our fasting of food is just symbolic of what must be a fasting of our hearts and our lives. There are things we must fast from. Like what?We need to fast from resentment. We need to fast from revenge. We need to fast from violence. In fact, I think that is why Pope John Paul II, this week, has asked that all Catholics fast on Ash Wednesday for World Peace, and especially for peace in the Middle East. We need to fast from individualism and from isolation and from indifference. Many scholars and sociologists point to our American society and say, "It is the first time in history that there has been such great respect and value of the individual, and of the individual's freedom. But, among other things, it has led, on many levels, to a savage individualism that is being imitated and replicated in other societies throughout the world. And we see that savage individualism in commercialism, in advertising, in lawsuits (multiple lawsuits), and in the fairly low esteem that teaching and educational budgets are held, compared to other professions, because they serve the community, and we end up being concerned about me, about the individual. You would think that the media and television would help cure this because we find out what is going on with our neighbors, and with people in other lands. But we get so much instant information and we get it so constantly, every night, that I think we become numb and, if anything, we become separated from any feelings or empathy with others in the world.

Our fasting is a reminder of solidarity with the poor and a reminder that there are things we must fast from in our hearts, values that we must hold onto and other things that we have to let go of. But, here is the deal. Here's the thing. As Christian people and as believers, we are called upon to do more feasting than fasting. In fact, that is why Jesus is criticized, because He doesn't fast and He tells his disciples, "Don't fast." And He says, "Where is the next party?" This is what we find in Scripture. He is always going to banquets. For example, He goes to the wedding reception in Cana in Galilee, and He takes gallons and gallons and gallons of water and He turns it into wine, so they can celebrate. I've been to Cana in Galilee twice. And both times, I smiled when I got there, because you know what they have in Cana in Galilee now? They have wine tasting, and

it is awful! For a Californian's taste buds, it is terrible. Bring your own.

But the first time I went... I think it was 1986 I went to Cana. We were with a Franciscan priest who was a guide and had been for almost forty, fifty years. And he said, as we drove into Cana, "There have been some findings of the early writings that we never had before, and diaries of people at that time, and we found out some things that happened the morning after Jesus had changed those gallons and gallons and gallons of water into gallons of wine. We found out that Joseph came home with a terrible hangover. The next morning, he got up. His head was aching. His eyes were bleary. His mouth was dry. And Mary, like a dutiful wife, was saying, "Joseph, is there anything I can do for you?" And he answered, "Yes. Get me a glass of water. But, whatever you do, don't let the kid near it!"

In the Talmud, the rabbis say that we will have to give an account on the Day of Judgment for every good thing we could have enjoyed, but did not. We are called to be a people of feasting! And our feasting has to include, first of all, noticing God's blessings and having gratitude. At the Norton-Simon Gallery in Southern California, there is a great painting of the Wedding Feast of Cana. But it is focused on the celebration. Everyone is having a great time. And only if you look carefully down in the corner, will you see Jesus changing the water into wine. And they invite people to write comments there, regarding the paintings. Someone wrote this under that painting: "Even as the party goes on in the living of life, miracles and their meaning often go unnoticed, even as their effects influence the entire world." If we are going to be feasting, we have to notice and have something to feast about.

We have to be people of gratefulness. Someone has written, "Happiness is not what makes us grateful. It's gratefulness that makes us happy." So, the first thing our feasting has to include is gratitude, gratitude that leads to thanks and praise. The Greek word for that is "Eucharist." And the second thing our feasting has to include is community, community that leads to celebration together in the name of the Lord, as He told us. And the third thing our feasting has to lead to is compassion, compassion that leads to understanding and caring for those who have very little to feast about or to feast with. And finally, our feasting has to include justice that leads to that fulness of health and peace that we call "Shalom."

May we be a people fasting in solidarity with the poor and letting go of those things that are not values at all. May we be a people of feasting, in gratitude and community and compassion and in justice. Amen