

Lenten Practices Lent and Ramadan: a Muslim-Catholic Conversation Wednesday, April 5, 2017 7:00 PM (Make this a matter of your own personal effort and choice and then it will bear fruit.)

Good evening everyone and welcome. **The Christian practice of Lent is very different from Ramadan.** The Christian practice of **Lent is really a time for preparation for either Baptism** for those members of the community that want to come forward and become full members of the body of Christ **or the renewal of Baptism, which is basically the meaning of the Easter Triduum.** It is the celebration of Baptism and its meaning by **reflecting on the death and resurrection of Christ.**

The practices of Lent actually have undergone a great deal of change in my lifetime. **Until 1967 Catholics had very regulated rules about eating during Lent,** but it was not like Ramadan. There was no difference between daylight and nighttime. There was a 24 hour fast. During that time a Catholic was allowed to have one full meal and two small meals and liquid could be taken at any time, so it was different. Now those rules still apply only for two days of the year: **Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. The rest of the time since 1967 Pope Paul VI said Catholics should decide for themselves how to fast.** So whether we are really fasting or not, I'm not totally sure. Some of us do; some of us don't, except those two days.

There is also in our Church—there was traditionally an abstinence from meat on every **Friday** in honor of the day Christ died. That has been reserved now only for the **Lenten period when we abstain from meat.** In the old days when we had very strict fasting there were also days of semi-abstinence when you could have meat once a day, but not more than once. **Now those rules, as I say, have ceded to personal responsibility and a new attitude toward spirituality.**

But when we go back into history the origin of **Christian practices came from Christ** himself, not the Bible that said you had to do it, but rather **Christ's own practice,** because when he was baptized in the Jordan, Scripture says that the Holy Spirit led him to the desert where he fasted for forty days. Now fasting was for him fasting from everything, food and water, but **more than food and water because the desert is a place where one is totally alone with God and does not have the influence of what we might call society.** And this is even more important than fasting from food and water from the standpoint of spiritual authors, **because the mind and the soul are fed with impressions.** So impressions are the food for the soul and the mind. And the impressions that we get from the world are **often very unhealthy.** We get junk food from the world. So fasting for a Christian must be to **withdrawal to some degree from the barrage of impressions that are constantly coming from the world through the media and feasting on the word of God.**

And so this is for **a time of peace and contemplation and quiet, which leads then to the next idea which is prayer.** So fasting is one practice, if you will, a way of living, you might say. Prayer is the second one. Now prayer of course means **lifting the heart and mind up to God,** according to the catechism. But what does that really mean? It means that **we try to become aware of God in our life.** And the fact is if we are not aware of God, then we are not properly conscious. So spiritual authors will say that when we forget about God, in a sense we fall asleep.

So the role of increased prayer is to awaken in our ordinary lives, in ordinary occupations to the presence of God who always is and who is always present, although we are not present to God. Now St. Paul said in Romans: “Be not conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” **So prayer and fasting is about this being transformed by the renewal of our minds.**

And then the third part is **almsgiving**. Now almsgiving in the Christian tradition **does have a role in helping the poor and feeding the hungry**, but that is not primary. **What was primary in almsgiving in the Christian tradition was the freeing of a person from the possessiveness of one’s money or one’s possessions**, because of the idea that whatever you own really owns you, and therefore to the degree to which you are rich, you are not free. St. Paul says in his Letter to Timothy that **“The love of money is the root of all evil.”** Now we know that’s **an exaggeration**. There are some forms of evil not rooted in the love of money, but it is the root of a lot of evil in the world. A lot of the controversies today about capitalism really are, in my opinion, not taking all this into consideration. **Capitalism after all is a system**; it’s an economic system. **It’s people in the system that are either practicing evil or not**. And if people in the world system are loving money and wanting to hold onto their money and hoard their money and not share their money, well that is a terrible problem for them and for the whole world. It spreads. **So the great inequity of the world is to a great degree due to the love of money. So almsgiving is really trying to break that connection within oneself.** And the result of that of course is that people can benefit. Well, people do benefit from good works, but the principal focus is on one’s own freedom. So we have fasting, and we have prayer, and we have this practice of almsgiving, which sometimes is called charity.

Now Jesus himself, however, also taught that **“When you pray, go to your room and shut your door,”** and we read this every Ash Wednesday. And he said, **“When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing; and when you fast, wash your face and groom your hair, so that no one will know you are fasting.”** Now this is also a very important aspect of Christian practice. What is behind it is the fact that in the human being **we really have to discover the true self**, which I will call it the true self or the actual person **God has called us to be**. This is a journey of discovery, and on the way we are very often impeded and encumbered by false ideas. Thomas Merton said that there is the true self and the false self. Other writers say there is **the essence that God creates and then the personality that you create**.

Now the personality is not necessarily evil or bad, but it isn’t really truly authentically who you are, but the danger is in doing good works and even being prayerful, in being charitable and being disciplined—and by the way many Christian authors mention some of the same benefits of fasting as our earlier speaker mentioned in terms of self-control and in general basic physiological health and psychological well-being. And **the danger is this: that as we do good we might feed the wrong self**. We might strengthen what needs to be weakened. We might strengthen the personality, whereas it’s the essence that needs to be strengthened. **We might strengthen the false self with its own feelings of esteem** and so on. In fact Jesus himself was quite critical of this phenomenon that he saw in his own coreligionists. So he criticized it even to the point of exaggeration. No one ever blew a trumpet before him on the street corner; I mean, no one ever did that, but it’s an expression of **making people realize that you are praying, or making people realize you are fasting, or making people realize you are charitable**. “Don’t

let your left hand know what your right is doing,” means that not only should you not want to be thanked, **you shouldn’t even thank yourself or praise yourself, because you should be doing for God.** And when you pray you should be praying to God not in a public place. That’s why he says, “Go to your room, shut your door.” Now we still have Mass and we want people to come to Mass, but the point is that **the special work of Lent is a private thing, a personal thing, a secret thing between you and God,** and that other people can get in the way of that.

So now Christianity is a communal religion so this is a specific and unusual aspect of Christian practice that is utterly personal and secret. “Go to your room; shut your door; wash your face; don’t let anyone know you are fasting.” Now the very idea of a communal fast is that everyone knows. In fact that was one of the great criticisms from conservatives who didn’t like the changes in our Church in regard to fasting when everything became a personal choice. They said, “Families eat together; they should fast together.” But the pope’s idea was following actually the recommendation of Jesus, don’t let anyone know. **Make this a matter of your own personal effort and choice and then it will bear fruit.** So whether or not people are fasting today, actually I don’t know; very few people discuss it. But we have the Scriptures and tens of thousands of people come into a Catholic church every Ash Wednesday and hear the gospel, “When you pray, go to your room, shut the door; when you fast, wash your face, so no one will know; and when you give alms, don’t let your left hand know what your right is doing.” So I can say I hope that that gospel is being carried out in practice, but I cannot swear to it.