

**How to Understand Fasting:  
Reasons Why We Fast  
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**Primary Reasons**

- ✓ It is one of the many ways we can worship God, by whatever named called.
- ✓ It is a way we can read, pray, meditate, and contemplate the Word of God. *Lectio Divina* has four separate steps: *lectio* (read), *meditatio* (meditate), *oratio* (pray), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). A passage of scripture is read, its meaning is reflected upon, and it is then followed by prayer and contemplation. For Catholic Christians, the focus is not a theological analysis of passages, but rather a viewing of them with Christ as the key to their meaning. For Orthodox Christians, fasting can be a way of contemplating the Transcendent, which can also involve *Visio Divina* (i.e., divine seeing).
- ✓ It is also a form of prayer that uses the entire body, with each physical sensation reminding us to draw ourselves into deeper prayer and meditation ( Matthew 4:4). Fasting by Jesus and his disciples was always accompanied by prayer.
- ✓ It is a way of reminding ourselves what Jesus did for 40 days after his baptism (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:1-2). For many Christians, the 40-day season of Lent begins with fasting on Ash Wednesday, continues on each Friday, and culminates on Good Friday.
- ✓ It is a way of preparing ourselves for the joyful feast of Easter. Celebrated as a single joyful feast, Eastertide is the period of 50 days, spanning from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday, with each of the seven Sundays celebrated as a Sunday of Easter.
- ✓ It is a way to become strengthened against temptations (Matthew 4:1-11), such as the hunger for fame, power, riches, or recognition.
- ✓ It is a spiritual discipline that Jesus assumed his followers practiced. In English translations, Matthew 6:16-18 does not begin with a conditional statement (i.e., not "If you fast..."). Rather, it begins with an affirmative statement (i.e., "When you fast...").
- ✓ It is a way we can identify and empathize with the hungry and the poor, while entering into a spirit of poverty ourselves. Although there is a big difference between voluntarily choosing to fast and being forced to go hungry, we observe fasting as time to think of and pray for those who through circumstance have little or nothing to eat.
- ✓ It is a way of practicing the spiritual discipline of humility, because fasting can otherwise become a source of boasting and pride (Matthew 6:16). For these reasons, we are better off fasting in anonymity and telling only those who need to know (such as a medical adviser, spiritual director, or spouse).

## Secondary Reasons

- ✓ It is a way of taking care of our body, which is the temple of the spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).
- ✓ It is a way of living that can provide a counterweight to the American mainstream cultural values of gluttony, hedonism, and greed.
- ✓ It is a way to become more aware of our sins (e.g., pride, gluttony, and lust) and to practice spiritual virtues (e.g., humility, abstinence, chastity, and temperance).
- ✓ It is a way of mastering our physical desires, so that they do not master us.
- ✓ It is a way of taming our material desires, so that they do not own us.
- ✓ It is a way of practicing self-regulation of our emotions. One moment, we can be totally focused on *God* and the next moment we can notice an emotion (e.g., being anxious about needs, wallowing in pity, or harboring resentments). Learning to refocus on *God's* abundance and goodness during our tough emotional times helps us when we experience similar emotions when we are not fasting.
- ✓ It is not a commandment for Christians; it is a voluntary action in which we celebrate our freedom.

### Tertiary Reasons

- ✓ It can be a way of focusing on the lives of a virtual Who's Who of Sacred Scripture:
  - Moses the lawgiver fasted 40 days and nights before receiving the Commandments (Deuteronomy 9:9-10), and he fasted 40 more days and nights after shattering the two tablets of stone because of all the sin his people had committed (Deuteronomy 9:18).
  - David the king fasted while mourning his unnamed child's fatal illness (2 Samuel 12:1-23).
  - David the king humbled his soul with fasting (Psalm 35:13).
  - Elijah the prophet fasted 40 days while escaping wicked Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19:4-8).
  - Ezra the scribe and priest fasted while mourning over sin (Ezra 10:6-17).
  - Esther the queen fasted for the safety of the Jews (Esther 4:15-17).
  - Darius the king fasted for the safety of Daniel (Daniel 6:18-23).
  - Daniel the seer fasted after mourning over of a vision of a great war (Daniel 10:1-17).
  - Nehemiah the rebuildier of the walls of Jerusalem fasted (Nehemiah 1:4).
  - Joel the prophet wrote about fasting, weeping, and mourning (Joel 2:12)
  - Anna the prophetess worshiped night and day, fasting and praying (Luke 2:36-37).
  - John the Baptist's disciples fasted (Mark 2:18; Matthew 9:14).
  - Jesus the Christ fasted before his temptations by Satan (Matthew 4:1-2).
  - Paul fasted for three days as part of his conversion (Acts 9:1-9).
  - Church elders in Antioch fasted before sending out missionaries (Acts 13:1-3).
  
- ✓ It can be way of learning from the lives of other Christians:
  - St. Francis of Assisi
  - Martin Luther
  - John Calvin
  - John Wesley
  - Jonathan Knox
  - Pastor Wang Hsi (Xi Shengmo) of China

## Levels of Fasting

**Level Five:** Fasting anonymously, so that no one even suspects you are fasting. (Matthew 6:16)

**Level Four:** Fasting intentionally, when not required, and letting others know. (virtue signaling)

**Level Three:** Fasting gratefully, when required, and bragging about it. (arrogance, pride)

**Level Two:** Fasting compliantly, when required, and expecting others to do so (judging) <sup>1</sup>

**Level One:** Fasting grudgingly, when required, with a sour countenance. (Matthew 6:16)

**Level Zero:** Not fasting when required. (Possible risk factor: Gluttony) <sup>2</sup>

**Matthew 6:** <sup>16</sup> "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

**Note 1:** On days of mandatory fasting, Catholics may eat only one full meal during the day. Additionally, they may have two smaller meals, known as "collations." Church requirements on fasting only relate to solid food, not to drink, so Church law does not restrict the amount of water or other beverages—even alcoholic drinks—that may be consumed during the day.

**Note 2:** Valid exceptions would include some medical conditions.

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## References

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