

## Prayerful fasting

- Rather than just ‘not eating’ why not make use of your usual meal time as a time of prayer.
- Consider praying together as a family, or with a group of friends or work-colleagues. The prayer might be fed by using the scriptures for the Mass of the day or of the preceding or following Sunday. Alternately a simple form of daily prayer is provided in *A Time of Prayer* (published by CTS for the Liturgy Office).
- The prayer time might be spent before the Blessed Sacrament. This form of prayer can be a private act or communal worship. Such prayer extends the union with Christ which we reach in Holy Communion. It provides an opportunity for us to pray and work that we may imbue the world with the Christian spirit and be a witness of Christ in the midst of human society. (Resources are available on Liturgy Office website).
- Alternative forms of devotional prayer include the Stations of the Cross, and the Rosary.

**I**s not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly.  
Isaiah 58:6–8b

**A**ll-powerful Father, God of goodness,  
you provide for all your creation.  
Give us an effective love  
for our brothers and sisters  
who suffer from lack of food.  
Help us to do all we can to relieve their hunger,  
that they may serve you with carefree hearts.  
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ,  
your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you  
and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.  
Roman Missal

**G**od, all-powerful Father,  
may the living bread from heaven  
give us the courage and strength  
to go to the aid of our hungry brothers  
and sisters.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.  
Roman Missal

**Liturgy  
Office**  
ENGLAND  
& WALES

Excerpts from *The Roman Missal* © 1973 International Commission on English in the Liturgy, Inc. All rights reserved.  
The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, copyrighted 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.  
This leaflet is one of series of resources for the Sacrament of Penance produced by the Liturgy Office, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1PL. [www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources](http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources)

# Fasting

Whenever you **fast**, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to show others that they are **fasting**. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you **fast**, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your **fasting** may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father **will reward you**.

Matthew 6:16–18

## Introduction

Fasting, prayer and alms-giving are three traditional penitential disciplines which the Church has inherited from its Jewish roots. They are disciplines which are also shared with other religious traditions, most notably that of Islam.

Fasting, prayer and almsgiving are three distinct disciplines. To focus on any one of these is valuable. However it is with the assistance of each of the three that we are best able to lead lives rooted in the love of Christ.

Each discipline complements the others, and can easily give focus and direction to the others. For example alms-giving, from what is not simply what we have left over, but even from what we could make good use of ourselves; and directing this charity to those who, through prayer, we have recognised to be in greatest need.

Charitable giving is common even in secular society. People can easily appreciate the meaning of prayer. However the meaning of fasting is sometimes less clear to people today. It is too easily confused with dieting and often viewed with suspicion in a society aware of the illnesses of bulimia and anorexia.

This leaflet seeks to help to recover for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians the meaning of fasting, so that the discipline may again become a useful spiritual exercise, helping us to better know and better follow the Lord Jesus.

## *Fasting and Abstinence*

Lent is the traditional season of renewal and repentance in Christ. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are observed as days of fast and abstinence. Fasting means that the amount of food we eat is considerably reduced. Abstinence means that we give up a particular kind of food or drink or form of amusement.

Something of the quality of Lent is attached to every Friday. These days too are set aside as penitential days when we are to recall Christ's passion and death.

The Friday penance may be met in a variety of ways, for example

- a) by abstaining from meat or some other food
- b) by abstaining from alcoholic drink, smoking or some form of amusement
- c) by making the special effort involved in family prayer, taking part in the Mass, visiting the Blessed Sacrament or praying the Stations of the Cross
- d) by fasting from all food for a longer period than usual and perhaps giving what is saved in this way to the needy at home and abroad
- e) by making a special effort to help somebody who is poor, sick, old or lonely, or committing time and effort to working for justice.

The full guidelines of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales on the Friday Fast can be found at [www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Penance](http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Penance)

## *The meanings of food*

Eating is very rarely simply a matter of nourishing our bodies. Rather it is an activity overlaid with all sorts of ways of indicating the value that we place on events in life, on other people and even on ourselves. Consider for example the way that meals are frequently associated with important stages in our lives – marriages and funerals, graduation, birthdays, successes and celebrations of all sorts. Consider the way that we can easily distinguish between people we would easily share a meal with, and those we would not, those who we feel would honour us by inviting us to dinner and those we feel we might feel we would honour by accepting.

In fasting we use eating to mark and assist our relationship with God. We try to abstain from eating in excess to control and refocus our 'appetites' and 'desires' on God, the source of all that is good and necessary for our lives. The very experience of hunger can make our prayer more intense and give us a greater awareness of the active presence of God in our lives.

The experience of fasting reminds us of the value of a simple lifestyle, and the importance of reverence for our body, avoiding all forms of excess and addiction.

The occasional fast, departing from our usual patterns of eating as a spiritual activity, helps us to return to our everyday meals with a new recollection of God's blessings on us.