



WORSHIPPING WELL

Fasting and Holy Indifference

How does a Christian gain a 'holy indifference' from the things that entwine us and ensnare us? A traditional answer is fasting. This should come as no surprise, but what is important is that across the first millennium of Christian faith fasting was a normal part of the week. In effect, the Lenten fast was simply a prolongation of the usual weekday fast. It seems opportune to explore something of the ways of fasting in the Roman tradition, leaving the intensification of the Lenten fast aside for the while.

The early Christians divided the week with two days dedicated to fasting, Wednesday and Friday. There is some contrast here with the practices of pious Jewish people who fasted on Mondays and Thursday. The fast involved abstinence from food and drink usually until 3.00 pm, the time set down in the scriptures as that of the death of Jesus. The fast on Fridays also has strong resonance with the day of Jesus' crucifixion. In this connection fasting was understood as an action in communion with the sufferings of Christ, sufferings he freely embraced as he brought us salvation. The early Christians, then, knew it as an act of penance and repentance, and saw it as one of the remedies bringing about the forgiveness of ordinary everyday sins¹. Today this theology has been expanded. Christians often fast both in accompaniment with the sufferings of Christ and as an act of solidarity with the hungry, the starving and the needy in our world. Just recently two new forms of fasting garnered publicity: environmental awareness through fasting from carbon and the personal self-discipline of abstinence from 'facebook'.

The custom of fasting entailed different practices across the church, and has given rise to a pivotal anecdote about how liturgy does not seek uniformity but is more than comfortable with unity in diversity. The story involves Augustine and his mother Monica, who was disturbed that as she settled into a new life in Milan she found that the Christians there did not fast on Saturdays as well as Fridays. After all in the church she was used to in North Africa, the faithful there fasted on Saturdays, a habit they shared with the Christians in the city of Rome. This devoted son tells it as follows:

My mother, who had followed me to Milan, found that the church there did not fast on Saturday. She began to be anxious and uncertain as to what she should do. I was not then concerned with such things, but for her sake I consulted on

¹ See Gerard Moore, *Why Rites of Reconciliation Matter* (Strathfield: St Pauls 2007) 35-36, 54.

this matter that man of most blessed memory, Ambrose. He answered that he could teach me nothing but what he himself did, because, if he knew anything better, he would do it ... He followed up and said 'When I go to Rome, I fast on Saturday, but here I do not. Do you also follow the custom of whatever church you attend, if you do not want to give or receive scandal'²

And so it is clear: when in Rome do as the Romans! Interestingly Augustine goes on to attack those who make too much out of questions such as who has the best practice when it comes to fasting. He placed emphasis on what was according to scripture, the tradition across the universal church, and what is pastorally fruitful. He was scathing about people making controversies of issues outside these three criteria: *but they are insisted upon simply because somebody thinks out a reason for them, or because a man was accustomed to do so in his own country, or because he saw things done somewhere on a pilgrimage, and he esteemed them to be more correct because they were further from his own usage.*

The centrality of fasting in weekly Christian worship can be seen in the way that some days of the week are named in the Irish or Gaelic language. Wednesday is called Dé Ceadaoin, 'the day of the first fast', Friday is Dé hAoine, 'the day of the fast', while Thursday is Déardaoin, 'the day between the fasts'³.

Gerard Moore

Director (Research)

Sydney College of Divinity

(Gerard has been preparing this material for an upcoming book on the liturgical year)

² The text is from around the year 400 and is taken from Letter 54 in the collection of the Letters of St Augustine. This translation is from *St Augustine Letters, Vol 1 (1-82)*, translated by W. Parsons, The Fathers of the Church (New York: The Fathers of the Church, Inc, 1951), 253. The passage is reproduced in Thomas K. Carroll and Thomas Halton, *Liturgical Practice in the Fathers*, Message of the Fathers of the Church 21 (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988), 75-76.

³ Carroll, *Liturgical Practice in the Fathers*, 76.