

Fasting and Feasting – Thoughts on Renewing Fasting and Abstinence!

Food plays an important role in the Catholic tradition. So many of our scriptural passages are related to food: the last supper, the breaking of bread, the sharing of loaves and fishes, the wedding feast! These food symbols have identified us as Christians since the earliest days of the Church. The words, “*I am the bread of life*” (John 6:35) highlight our belief in Jesus who nourishes and sustains us.

Recently the Faith Ecology Network (FEN), which our centre co-ordinates, put on a forum at the Sydney Pre-Parliament of World Religions Day on the topic of *Fasting and Feasting*. Through the dialogue with members of other religious traditions during the planning stages, and through the presentations by the various speakers, I was challenged to reflect on aspects of our Catholic beliefs and practices pertaining to food that I think could do with renewal. (One of the benefits of inter-faith dialogue is that it assists one to learn more about one’s own religious tradition!)

The practice of fasting by Muslims during the month of Ramadan and Jews on Holy Days reminded me of the benefits of prayerful fasting. Their rituals associated with food preparation and consumption urged me to think more deeply about the blessing before a meal. The Buddhist practice of meditation, for example on a piece of bread, encouraged me to think about the interconnectedness of our food with other humans and other living species. The Hindu practice of *Ahimsa* or non-injury to animals which means many Hindus are vegetarians led me to think again about abstinence from meat, once a regular weekly practice in the Church.

As disciples of Jesus who gather round his table in the Eucharist, are we attentive to the realities about food?

Our common home, the Earth, is groaning in pain from the actions of we humans. We live in a world where one billion people are hungry at the same time as obesity is an increasing problem. This is a contemporary context for our Catholic faith.

Pope Benedict XVI on the United Nations World Food Day 2009 said, "The means and resources the world has at its disposal today could supply sufficient food to satisfy the growing needs of everyone. Why is it not possible, then, to avoid having so many people suffer so gravely from hunger that they find themselves facing the most extreme consequences?" Columban priest, Sean McDonagh, has written extensively on some of these causes: petrochemical agriculture, monoculture, the growth of multinational corporations that dominate seed-production, processing and distribution of food, the loss of bio-diversity and increasing investment in military and other technology. Pope Benedict XVI suggested others, including "the unstoppable race to consume, the lack of a will from states to stop the selfishness of groups of nations, and unbridled speculation that impacts price and consumption mechanisms." Behind everything, the Pope said, there is a false understanding of values that "only privileges the race for material goods, forgetting the true nature of the human person and his deepest aspirations."

These underlying causes have led to our becoming disconnected from the sources of our food.

At the FEN forum, key speaker Russ Grayson, an ex farmer, now educator on food sustainability pointed out that in the lifetime of the next generation the peoples of the world will need:

- a) to produce 50% more food on the same area of land,
- b) do this sustainably and justly
- c) change food production and distribution because of peak oil and the effects of climate change, and
- d) preserve local food growing land.

Awareness of these issues needs to be in our minds as we practice our faith. Responding to these needs should be a priority for people of all faith and none.

A good way to develop the values that Pope Benedict speaks of could be to revive our practices of fasting with prayer, reflective blessings before meals and regular weekly abstinence from meat. This could be enhanced by sharing these practices with people of other faiths. We could accompany this with the sharing of information and co-operative action.

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