



LOOKING THROUGH STAINED GLASS

A Column by Fr. Tom

Why Do We Call it a Fast, When it Seems to Go SOOO Slow?

Fasting can be difficult, but the effort can be life-changing. In the next two columns I would like to discuss answers to the following questions: What is fasting? Why do we fast? Why should we fast? How can fasting change our lives and the lives of others?

What is fasting? There are at least two answers to this question. First, the Church prescribes fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. The Church also prescribes abstinence from meat (a type of fast) on Ash Wednesday and all the Fridays of Lent. However, fasting can also be a personal decision. This is the most common type of fast that is practiced during Lent. For example, some people will choose a complete fast from all food on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and other days, instead of the modified fast that the Church prescribes. Others may fast from a particular food or activity for the duration of Lent. (i.e. What are you giving up for Lent?)

When we consider what type of fast is appropriate for us, we should also consider why we fast? While “because the Church says we have to” is a perfectly valid reason, it doesn’t seem like the kind of reason that would inspire a desire to fast. When obligation is the only reason to do something, our hearts are not in it. For example, when my parents told me to clean my room, “because I said so” didn’t seem like a good enough reason, but when I tripped over some toys in the middle of the night and injured my foot,

I began to see the wisdom. Am I saying that if we don’t fast we are setting ourselves up to get hurt? Kind of. We fast for two basic reasons – to help ourselves and to connect with others. For example, there are many people who fast for health reasons instead of religious reasons, such as those who fast from foods to which they are allergic and those who fast from unhealthy foods.

But our Lenten fast should reach deeper than this. One of the reasons that people fast from chocolate, coffee or alcohol is because they fear that these substances may have some control over them. They fast to regain that control. In addition, people fast in order to delay gratification or pleasure. Why delay gratification? Some of the most important things we do in this life require us to delay gratification. We don’t get a doctorate in the first grade. Why would athletes train all those hours for an Olympic gold medal when a blue ribbon at the Palm Beach 5K would do? More importantly, delaying gratification teaches us to work and to hope for an even greater prize than these. I may never win an Olympic medal, but I certainly hope to win the prize of Heaven. If we are so focused on the pleasures (and treasures) of this life, we risk losing the treasures of Heaven. [1 Cor 9:24-27] Fasting helps us look toward Heaven.

In the next column, we will explore additional reasons to fast and how fasting can change our lives and the lives of others.