

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent (A)

March 14, 2026

“Fasting”

We began Lent on Ash Wednesday when we heard the reading from Matthew, chapter 6, on the proper attitude towards almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Fasting is probably the hardest of the Lenten practices, but it has many fruits.

*“Live as children of the light,”* Saint Paul tells the Ephesians (5:8). Children of light fast and abstain from food and drink in order to stay spiritually sharp and strong against temptation.

Saint Frances de Sales listed four fruits of fasting: (1) fasting fortifies the spirit; (2) fasting raises the spirit to God; (3) fasting fights the passions of the flesh; and (4) fasting provides power to overcome disordered fleshly desire, like lust.

When we fast, it is easier to say “no” to temptation than when we don’t fast.

Jews did not fast very much. The Jewish Law or Torah required only one day of fasting each year, on the Day of Atonement in October. The Israelite army fasted as part of preparation for battle in the Book of Judges (Jud. 20:26; 2 Chron. 20:3-4). Daniel fasted as he prayed and the king of Nineveh ordered his sinful people to fast in atonement for idolatry.

Jesus fasted in the desert for forty days (Mt. 4:1). He fasted in preparation for his mission. He recommended fasting to make us aware of God’s presence in ourselves and in the world around us.

The first Christians fasted on Wednesdays (to make up for the betrayal of Judas) and Fridays (to unite themselves with the cross). A fast day mean abstaining from food until the evening meal, which would be served after sundown. Muslims still observe this practice.

Fasting was also practiced by early Christian communities in preparation for baptism and Eucharist. The Church began to regular fasting in the fourth century, and in the Middle Ages, the amount and kind of food were regulated. It was at this time that meat, eggs, and dairy products were prohibited on fast days.

Prior to 1917, Catholics were required to fast throughout Lent, except on Sundays, taking only one meal each day. We were also expected to abstain from meat, eggs, and dairy products on fast days, as well as every Friday and Saturday.

In 1966, Pope Paul VI warned of the dangers of a legalistic approach to fasting, and offered some direction on the practice. He reminded Catholics that the outward expression of fasting should also be accompanied by an interior attitude of conversion. In other words, fasting on the outside must be accompanied by a change of heart on the inside.

The following story illustrates this well: A priest was walking down a busy city street when a large man confronted him. "Give me your money or you die," the man commanded, holding a gun. The priest replied, "Ok. But I'm a little rattled and need a cigarette. Would you like one?" The robber replied, "Oh, no thanks, father, I gave them up for Lent!"

Fasting is good, but charity must accompany it. Saint Augustine put it this way: "Do you wish your prayer to fly upward toward God? Give it two wings: fasting and almsgiving."

A donation to Church or charity is an excellent way to accompany fasting. You could, for example, put the money you would spend at the movies on popcorn and soda, or at a basketball game toward Catholic Charities or another charity. In other words, direct the money you spend on yourself to help others, and you will be living the Lenten spirit.

There are lots of diets out there. Dieting is for the body, but fasting is for the soul. Fasting is a life-long habit to embrace, but much good can come from it.

Someone wrote: "Our lives change when our habits change. Our habits change when we make resolutions, remind ourselves of those resolutions, hold ourselves accountable for them, and perform them. Sometimes we fail, but there is no success that isn't checkered with failure . . . our bodies are vehicles that God has given our souls to express life in the material realm. Until we get a grip on our bodies, we will never get a grip on life. Until we learn to reign over our bodies, we will never really experience all that life can be" (Kelly, *7 Habits*, 128).

Virgin Most Pure, pray that we have the strength to embrace the virtue of fasting this Lent and beyond. God bless you.