



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II **GENERAL AUDIENCE** Wednesday, 21 March 1979

1. "*Sanctify a fast!*" (Joel 1:14). They are the words that we listened to in the first reading on Ash Wednesday. They were written by the Prophet Joel, and the Church establishes the practice of Lent in conformity with them, ordering fasting. Today the practice of Lent, defined by Paul VI in the Constitution "*Poenitemini*", is considerably reduced as compared with practices of the past. In this matter the Pope left a great deal to the decision of the Episcopal Conferences of the individual countries. They, therefore, have the task of adapting the requirements of fasting according to the circumstances that prevail in their respective societies. He also recalled that the essence of Lenten repentance consists not only of fasting, but also of prayer and almsdeeds (works of mercy). So it is necessary to decide according to circumstances, since fasting itself can be "replaced" by works of mercy and prayer. The aim of this particular period in the life of the Church is always and everywhere repentance, that is, conversion to God. Repentance, in fact, understood as conversion, that is "metanoia", forms a whole, which the tradition of the People of God already in the old Covenant and then Christ himself linked, in a certain way, with prayer, almsdeeds and fasting.

Why fasting?

At this moment there perhaps come into our minds the words with which Jesus answered the disciples of John the Baptist when they asked him: "Why do your disciples not fast?" Jesus answered: "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Mt 9:15). In fact the time of Lent reminds us that the bridegroom has been taken away from us. Taken away, arrested, imprisoned, slapped, scourged, crowned with thorns, crucified... Fasting in the time of Lent is *the expression of our solidarity* with Christ. Such was the meaning of Lent throughout the centuries and such it remains today.

"My love has been crucified and there is no longer in me the flame that desires material things", as the Bishop of Antioch, Ignatius, writes in the letter to the Romans (Ign. Antioch., *Ad Romanos* VII, 2).

2. Why fasting? It is necessary to give this question a wider and deeper answer, in order to *clarify the relationship between fasting and "metanoia", that is, that spiritual change which brings man closer to God*. We will try therefore to concentrate not only on the practice of abstention from food or from drink — that, in fact, is the meaning of "fasting" in the common sense — but on the deeper meaning of this practice which, moreover, can and must sometimes be "replaced" by another one. Food and drink are indispensable for man to live, he uses them and must use them, but he may not abuse them in any way. The traditional abstention from food and drink has as its purpose to introduce into man's existence not only the necessary balance, but also detachment from what might be defined a "consumer attitude". In our times this attitude has become one of the characteristics of civilization and in particular of Western civilization. *The consumer attitude!* Man geared to material goods, multiple material goods, very often abuses them. It is not a question here of lust of food and drink. When man is geared exclusively to possession and use of material goods — that is, of things — then also the whole civilization is measured according to the quantity and the quality of the things with which it is in a position to supply man, and is not measured with the yardstick suitable for man. This civilization, in fact, supplies material goods not just in order that they may serve man to carry out creative and useful activities, but more and more... to satisfy the senses, the excitement he derives from them, momentary pleasure, an ever greater multiplicity of sensations. We sometimes hear it said that the excessive increase of audiovisual media in the rich countries is not always useful for the development of intelligence, particularly in children; on the contrary, it sometimes contributes to checking its development. The child lives only on sensations, he looks for ever-new sensations... And thus he becomes, without realizing it, a slave of this modern passion. Satiating himself with sensations, he often remains passive intellectually; the intellect does not open to search of truth; the will remains bound by habit which it is unable to oppose. It is seen from this that modern man must *fast*, that is, abstain not only from food or drink, but *from many other means of consumption*, stimulation, satisfaction of the senses. To fast means to abstain, to renounce something.

3. Why renounce something? Why deprive oneself of it? We have already partly answered this question. However the answer will not be complete, if we do not realize that man is himself also because he succeeds in depriving himself of something, because he is capable of saying "no" to himself. Man is a being composed of body and soul. Some modern writers present this composite structure of man in the form of layers, and they speak, for example, of exterior layers on the surface of our personality, contrasting them with the layers in depth. Our life seems to be divided into such layers and takes place through them. While the superficial layers are bound up with our sensuality, the deep layers are an expression, on the contrary, of man's spirituality, that is, of conscious will, reflection, conscience, the capacity of living superior values. This image of the structure of the human personality can serve to understand the meaning of fasting for man. It is not a question here only of the religious meaning, but of a meaning that is expressed through the so-called "organization" of man as a subject-person. Man develops regularly when the deeper layers of his personality find sufficient expression, when the sphere of his interests and aspirations is not limited just to the exterior and superficial layers, connected with human sensuality. *To facilitate such a development, we must sometimes deliberately detach ourselves from what serves to satisfy sensuality*, that is, from those exterior, superficial layers.

Therefore we must renounce every thing that "nourishes" them. This, in short, is the interpretation of fasting nowadays. Renunciation of sensations, stimuli, pleasures and even food or drink, is not an end in itself. It must only, so to speak, prepare the way for deeper contents by which the interior man "is nourished". This renunciation, this *mortification must serve to create in man the conditions to be able to live the superior values*, for which he, in his own way, hungers. This is the "full" meaning of fasting in the language of today. However, when we read the Christian authors of antiquity or the Fathers of the Church, we find in them the same truth, often expressed in a surprisingly "modern" language. St Peter Chrysologus, for example, says.. "Fasting is peace of the body, strength of minds, vigour of souls" (*Sermo VII: de jejunio* 3); and again: "Fasting is the helm of human life and governs the whole ship of our body." (*Sermo VII: de jejunio* 1.) And St Ambrose replies as follows to possible objections to fasting: "The flesh, because of its mortal condition, has some specific lusts: With regard to them you are granted the right to curb them. Your flesh is under you...: do not follow the promptings of the flesh to unlawful things, but curb them somewhat even as regards lawful ones. In fact he who does not abstain from any of the lawful things, is also very close to unlawful things." (*Sermo de utilitate jejunii* III.V.VII). Also writers not belonging to Christianity declare the same truth. This truth is of universal significance. It is part of the universal wisdom of life.⁴ It is now certainly easier for us to understand why Christ the Lord and the Church unite the call to fasting with repentance, that is, with conversion. *To be converted to God*, it is necessary to *discover in ourselves* that which makes us *sensitive to what belongs to God*; therefore, the spiritual contents, the superior values which speak to our intellect, to our conscience, to our "heart" (according to biblical language). To open up to these spiritual contents, to these values, it is necessary to detach oneself from what serves only the consumer spirit, satisfaction of the senses. In the opening of our human personality to God, fasting — understood both in the "traditional" way and in the "modern" way — must go hand in hand with prayer because it is addressed directly to him. Furthermore, fasting, that is, the mortification of the senses, mastery of the body, confer on prayer a greater efficacy, which man discovers in himself. He discovers, in fact, that he is "different", that he is more "master of himself", that he has become interiorly free. And he realizes this in as much as conversion and the meeting with God, through prayer, bear fruit in him. It is clear from these our reflections today that fasting is not only a "vestige" of a religious practice of past centuries, but that it is also indispensable for the man of today, for Christians of our time. It is necessary to reflect deeply on this subject, particularly during the period of

Lent.

To the students present: Beloved Brothers! I am really happy at this meeting of mine with a large crowd of adolescents and boys and girls from, various Italian schools. You know how much the Pope relies on you who represent the expectation and hope of society and the Church. To all of you my affectionate and cordial greeting, which I extend to your teachers and your parents Who are making so many sacrifices for your cultural, human, and Christian formation. I deeply desire to urge you to prepare, right from the present time, by means of serious study, for the commitments you will have to assume in a few years' time in order to make your personal contribution to the construction of society, based on justice, freedom, and solidarity. You are Christians, that is, you are followers of Christ. You love him; you wish to be always faithful friends of his; you accept his teaching joyfully, which sometimes calls for sacrifices. Well: commit

yourselves to working enthusiastically among your fellow students, among your friends, at school, in order that Christ's message may penetrate deeply into consciences. Let the Lenten period, in which the Liturgy of the Church presents to our reflection the great mysteries of salvation, be lived by us all in an attitude of repentance and sacrifice, in order to prepare in a worthy way for the paschal meeting with Christ. Always be animated by the noble ideal proclaimed by Jesus: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (Jn 15:12 f.) With these wishes I willingly bless you.

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