



2. March 2022

**Holy fasting  
Ash Wednesday**

Jl 2:12-18

*'But now - declares Yahweh- come back to me with all your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning' Tear your hearts and not your clothes, and come back to Yahweh your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, and he relents about inflicting disaster. Who knows if he will not come back, relent and leave a blessing behind him, a cereal offering and a libation to be presented to Yahweh your God? Blow the ram's-horn in Zion! Order a fast, proclaim a solemn assembly, call the people together, summon the community, assemble the elders, gather the children, even infants at the breast! Call the bridegroom from his bedroom and the bride from her bower! Let the priests, the ministers of Yahweh, stand weeping between portico and altar, saying, 'Spare your people, Yahweh! Do not expose your heritage to the contempt, to the sarcasm of the nations! Why give the peoples cause to say, "Where is their God?" 'Then, becoming jealous over his country, Yahweh took pity on his people.*

A holy season... That is what we can call these forty days before Easter. Lent is to prepare us for the great event of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

*"Promulgate a holy fast"* - the reading for this day tells us. We all know that the forty days of Lent are related to the forty years in which the people of Israel passed through the desert and, moreover, to the forty days that Our Lord spent in fasting and prayer in the desert, at the end of which he repulsed the presumptuous attacks of the Devil for our sake (Mt 4:1-11).

How, then, can we make the most of this holy time?

First of all, the biblical reading speaks of an existential conversion; a conversion "with all our heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning".

What is the function of fasting in this context? The prophet is referring here to a corporal fasting; something that unfortunately is hardly practised in our Catholic Church today. A "holy fast", says the text... Certainly it must be done in the right attitude, i.e. it is not only to be an exercise of self-mastery or a merely ascetic practice. We are familiar with the prophets' criticism of a fast that does not produce the fruits that should come from it; a fast that is merely ritualistic, which could become sterile in the spiritual sense (cf. Isa 58:4-7).

The voluntary and conscious renunciation of the pleasures of the table, often served with abundance and opulence, opens in us a new dimension in the encounter with God, provided that this fasting is practised out of love for the Lord and willingly. It is similar to what happens when we carry a cross and accept it for Jesus' sake. When the natural joys of life, which usually go hand in hand with well-being and delight of the senses, are reduced, the longing for spiritual realities is awakened in us more. That is why fasting must be accompanied by prayer. Our soul, which tends to focus on its mental and sensual sphere, can more easily focus on the supernatural when it is not so occupied with what touches the senses.

Added to this is the sacrifice involved in fasting, which invites us to share with the poor those material goods that we ourselves are doing without.

Thus the act of sacrifice takes on an even higher and nobler meaning. Fasting, as a sacrifice made out of love, becomes a means to implore the Lord's compassion, to be reconciled with Him, as we see in today's reading.

Let us think of the Holy Sacrifice of the Eucharist, which our priests offer every day on the altars of the churches: It is the Lord Himself, who gives Himself for the Redemption of mankind! Christ's Sacrifice of love, offering His own life to fulfil the Father's Will and save mankind, attains its greatest meaning... The Father accepts it and, by virtue of it, grants man the forgiveness of sins and frees him from guilt.

Every sacrifice has something of this dimension, when it is offered voluntarily... Take, for example, the evangelical counsels, which are normally professed on entering religious life: poverty, chastity and obedience. Each of them entails sacrifice. But, even more, they have a positive dimension: in poverty one can better discover the richness of God; chastity invites one to cultivate a more spiritual love; obedience allows one to fulfil more attentively the Will of God.

Now, to return to "holy fasting"... There is, for example, in our Church the tradition of fasting on bread and water on Wednesdays and Fridays, which is a real sacrifice. And this voluntary deprivation can be used by the Lord in the fight against the powers of Evil, as He gives us to understand in the Gospel: *"This kind [of demons] does not come out except by prayer and fasting"* (Mk 9:29).

Just as no prayer presented to the Lord goes unheeded, but He accepts it as an act of love, so it is with the sacrifice of fasting, which He will know how to integrate into His plan of salvation.

Thus, voluntary fasting for the Lord's sake becomes a powerful weapon of love, which serves not only to deepen our own conversion, but is also an instrument in the Lord's hands to counteract the darkness in this world.

Holy fasting" is therefore a valuable act in itself, and God, the Holy One, makes it fruitful.

Perhaps these reflections will help us to discover the meaning of corporal fasting and encourage us to integrate it into our spiritual life, according to the possibilities of each one of us. The Lord will know how to reward it!