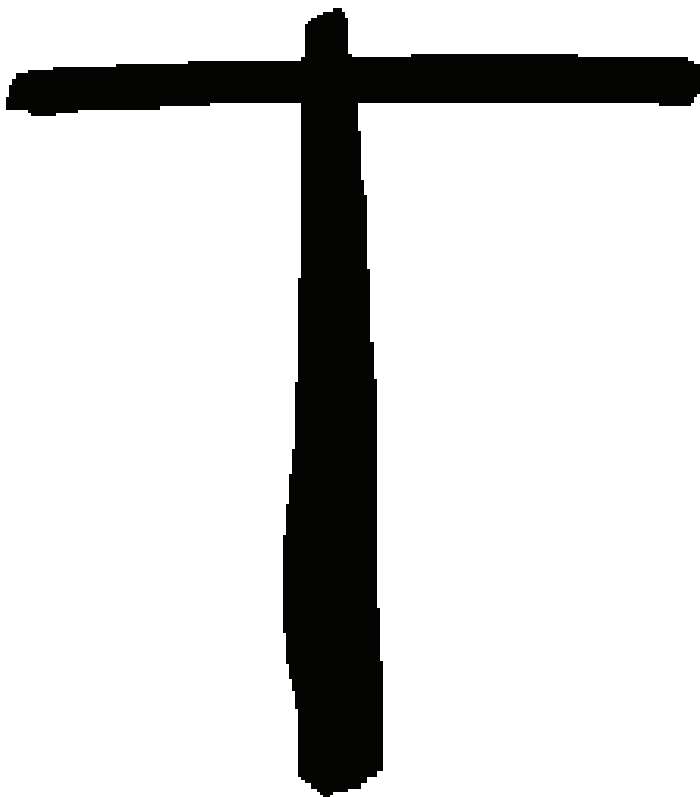


**The Third Order
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Thinking About Fasting

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Thinking About Fasting

FASTING is usually abstaining from food, less often from drink as well, since fasting from fluids is more dangerous. Fasting may serve a variety of purposes such as to improve bodily health or weight; to bring about an emotional 'high'; to make a protest or change the course of events, as Mahatma Gandhi or some hunger strikers have done; to express grief and loss; to increase personal awareness, particularly of one's inner being; to honour an individual, as Jews do at the Year's Mind of a parent; to prepare for or to recall and celebrate a significant event, like Esther's approach to her husband to plead for the Jews; or Christ's self giving on the Cross.

Fasting has been practised, to a greater or lesser extent, in almost all religions from ancient times until the present day and the methods differ quite widely. Fasts may be, for example, short or long. Jesus is by no means unique in fasting for forty days. They may be prescribed, customary or voluntary; private, as the twice weekly fasting of the Pharisees was meant to be, or public, like the Jewish Day of Atonement or like the national fast called in Britain for 6th February 1756 for fear of an invasion by the French.

The period of fasting may mean not total abstention but abstaining from certain foods only or missing certain meals. Sometimes abstention is from quite other things, particularly from sexual activity. Fasting is definitely NOT for everyone and so some information about this is given below.

When Not to Fast

Fasting for one or two days should be all right for any healthy person but anyone with a medical condition or suffering from serious under nourishment or nervous exhaustion should consult their doctor before they begin. Medical supervision and advice is most important for anyone undertaking a longer fast. This should continue throughout and also into the period of coming out of the fast, which has its own dangers. During a lengthy fast profound, possibly harmful, changes take place in the body, which show up only through the proper tests. The person fasting, in fact, may continue to be quite unaware of them, as the normal signals that something is at least amiss will not be operating.

Those suffering from diabetes mellitus; liver problems; poor kidney function; heart disease; psychiatric disorders; should not fast at all. People who are pregnant, are under sixteen or over seventy should fast for only short periods of time (Ross, chaps 3 and 9).

Francis, Clare and Fasting

The dedicated lives of these two saints, their brethren and sisters, were really one long fast, akin to the austerity and aims of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Rules specifically about food were included in the Later Rule of 1223 for the Brothers and in the Rule for the Sisters drawn up by Clare and approved shortly before her death, in 1253 (*Source Documents, Book of Roots*).

Clare laid even greater emphasis on austerity than St. Francis did. Three earlier Rules had been drawn up for Clare by Francis, Cardinal Hugolino and Pope Innocent the Third, which are not extant. Clare objected to the Pope's because it tried to erode her ideal of poverty and in writing to Agnes of Prague she even set aside Francis' wish that the sisters should eat more on certain feast days, saying instead: *We who are well should fast every day except on Sundays and at Christmas* (*A Sense of the Divine*, pp. 79-80).

Francis' Rule of 1223 (*Source Documents, Book of Roots*).

All the Friars are to fast from the feast of All Saints until Christmas. Those who voluntarily fast for forty days after Epiphany have God's blessing, because this is the period the Lord sanctified by his holy fast (cf. Matt 4:2). However, those who do not wish to do so should not be forced to it. All the friars are bound to keep the Lenten Fast before Easter but they are not bound to fast at other times, except on Fridays. However, in case of manifest necessity they are not obliged to corporal fasting.

Clare's Rule of 1253

(*Source Documents SSF, The Book of Roots*).

At all times the Sisters are to fast. At Christmas, on whatever day it may fall, they may take two repasts. The younger or weaker Sisters and those who are serving outside the monastery can be mercifully dispensed according as it shall seem good to the

Abbess. But in times of manifest necessity the Sisters shall not be bound to corporal fasting.

During the process for the canonisation of Clare, a witness said that that Clare ate nothing on Mondays, Wednesdays or Fridays during the Greater Lent and the Lent of St. Martin the Bishop. On the other days she ate so little bread, her only food, that she became ill though she remained always radiant. Francis and the Bishop of Assisi then commanded her to eat every day at least a half a roll of bread, about one and a half ounces (Stace, Sect. 18)

According to the *Assisi Compilation (A Sense of the Divine, p. 78)* Francis dealt very kindly with a brother unable to cope any longer with lack of food. He provided food and caused all the Brothers to eat with him so he should not feel embarrassed. Then Francis said that each Brother must consider his own constitution and provide his body with what it needed as far as their poverty would allow. Over abstinence was as much to be avoided as over indulgence.

On the other hand, chapter V of *The Legend of the Three Companions* reports: *He inflicted his flesh with such fasting that, whether healthy or sick, this excessively austere man hardly ever or never wanted to indulge his body (Francis of Assisi. Early Documents, Vol. II, p. 76).* Because of this he confessed on his deathbed that he had greatly sinned against Brother Body.

In the *Major Legend of Saint Francis*, Bonaventure writes: *And as a sign of his special devotion to Him, he found leisure from the feast of the Epiphany through forty successive days, that period when Christ was hidden in the desert, resting in a place of solitude, shut up in a cell, with as little food and drink as possible, fasting, praying and praising God without interruption. He was borne aloft into Christ with such burning intensity that the Beloved repaid him with such intimate love that it seemed to the servant of God that he was aware of the presence of the Saviour before his eyes (A Sense of the Divine, p. 92).*

There is also an interesting account of a forty-day fast of St Francis at La Verna, in *The Deeds of Blessed Francis and his Companions* by Ugolino of Montegiorgio.

Bernard of Quintavalle, like Francis, was frequently caught up into intense contemplation.

*For fifteen years, he always went about with his spirit and his face lifted towards heaven. And during that time, he never relieved his hunger at table, though he ate a little of what was placed before him, because, he said, 'We do not practice perfect abstinence from things if we do not taste them; true abstinence is refraining from things that taste good to the mouth'. And with this he had come to such clarity and light of intelligence that even great clerics came to him for solutions to the most difficult questions and obscure passages of scripture; and he enlightened them on every difficulty (quoted, *A Sense of the Divine*, p 243).*

The Origins of Fasting

Our remote ancestors, dependent upon hunting animals for food and, having no means of preserving raw meat, probably ate a kill at once and then had to exist without food for days or weeks until the next successful hunt. In this way, human beings would have become well adapted to prolonged periods of complete fasting from food. This means that they would also have become aware of some possible consequences of prolonged fasting: the disappearance of hunger after three or four days and the production of visions, hallucinations, exceptional clarity of mind and states of ecstasy.

The Use of Heightened Perceptions

Since the late twentieth century, it has been possible to explain these phenomena in terms of biochemical and physiological changes in our bodies and brains. The people of Antiquity explained them in terms of communication with the Holy. Pagan prophets fasted in order to become ecstatic and obtain insight into the future. The ancient Greeks also sought enlightenment of a more intellectual kind through this means. For them, fasting was the means by which the mind could rise to the gods, unencumbered by the fumes of food or the heaviness of the body.

Some neo-Platonic philosophers sought by fasting to make themselves like the gods, without wants or desires. Pythagoras (582-500 BC) thought that fasting would enable one to have real knowledge of the gods and not simply opinions about them and also to prophesy or to gain scientific skills. Some people believe that his important mathematical insights came through his practice of fasting (Ross, pp. 1-9). This is a practice which continues. Shirley Ross points out that, although short term fasting of one or two days does not produce bodily changes which lead to the heights of euphoria, there are powerful effects nonetheless. She quotes Damian, an advertising executive in the

late twentieth century, who wrote:

Fasting is very similar to being high (on drugs). Fasting is very important to me because it expands my consciousness and, hopefully, expands the world I live in. [...] I use the fast now on Mondays to get very clear [...] to take care of my conceptual work so the rest of the week is just filling out [...] after breaking fast I lose concentration and gain other things (Ross, pp.86 and 90 ff.).

Fasting in the Old Testament

A number of Old Testament prophets experienced heightened states of consciousness and also were at times able to foretell the future. It is not known whether these states were connected with fasting. Jeremiah makes it plain that he in no way sought such experiences. (Jer:1). It may be worth noting that throughout the Old Testament the Jews were constantly urged to cut themselves off from the practices of pagan religion. Fasting to alter consciousness may have been one of these. It is true that Daniel (Ch 9) fasted when seeking from God the meaning of a prophecy about the devastation of Jerusalem, but he also put on sackcloth and ashes and confessed the sins of the nation. This reads less like an attempt to enter an ecstatic state than an attempt to put himself and all Israel right before God so that no sinful attitude would prevent God from acting or from being heard.

Fasting by ordinary Jews could be voluntary, customary or prescribed and seems to have been for quite down to earth reasons, as follows:

- 1) To mourn: the most commonly described fast e.g. 2 Sam 1:11-12; Zech.7:1-13, where Zechariah asks whether the customary fasts in mourning for the Temple should continue, since it had now been rebuilt;
- 2) To attract God's compassion for the nation or an individual, e.g. 1 Sam 14:24 (preparing to meet overwhelming odds); Joel 2:12-17 (locusts); 2 Sam 12:15-17 (Bathsheba's child);
- 3) To express sincere repentance, especially the Day of Atonement, (Lev 23: 23-29) (Yom Kippur, the only fast explicitly prescribed in the law); Jonah 3 (Nineveh's penitential fast quoted as an example to Israel);
- 4) To secure God's help in great undertakings e.g. Neh.1:1-6 and 1:11; Ezra 8:21.

N.B. Isa. 58:3-7 declares that fasting is worthless without amendment of life.

Fasting in Later Judaism

Community fasts in Judaism continued to be penitential (Yom Kippur) or commemorative mourning rites (destruction of the Temple) or humbling the people before God's awesome power (commemorating the plagues of Egypt on 14 Nisan). Fasting has normally been accompanied by prayer and, where appropriate, by confession of sin. In addition to food and drink, some pleasurable activities, especially sex, have usually been ruled out. Fasting as a sign of mourning is commonly practised at the Year's Mind (Jahrzeit) of a parent.

However, Jews are wary of ascribing value to fasting for its own sake. Justice and righteousness are much more important. They believe, too, that fasting and other forms of self-denial could be regarded as insulting to God because every thing he made is good and should be enjoyed. There is one recorded case of a rabbi, Jacob of Marvege in France, who, in the thirteenth century, fasted in order to get guidance from heaven on points of legal interpretation. Some of his rulings were accepted but on the whole the method was not approved.

There is much rabbinic reflection on fasting in the Mishnah (3rd century), the Talmud (6th century) and in later commentaries. The trend over the centuries has been to make the rules more lenient, in accord with a general principle that we are spiritually degenerate compared with people in the past. Jews believe that fasting should always be confined within the bounds of common sense and not allowed to become destructive. There is a Jewish saying:

If the hunger of a fast makes you miserable, eat and be pleasant!

Fasting in the Gospels

Jesus, as a Jew, is likely to have joined in community fasts such as the Day of Atonement, which was laid down in the Law, and in those prescribed by custom. He also began his ministry with a prolonged private fast in the wilderness. However, he was taunted with not fasting as John's disciples did, in penitent preparation for the coming Kingdom of God. (Matt 11:18-19; Luke 7:33-34). He also made it clear that he did not expect his disciples to fast whilst he was with them. Celebration was in fact more in order. (Matt 9:15, Mark 2:19-20, Luke 5:34-35). This suggests that regular private fasting was something Jesus ignored, unlike the Pharisees who made a parade of their twice weekly fasting. Perhaps this practice of the Pharisees was an indication of their tendency to lay down many extra rules and regulations. To Jesus, these were a great and unnecessary burden for ordinary people whom he wished to free. (Matt 23:4 and 23-26 cp. Luke 11:42 and 11:46).

On the other hand, Jesus may have been at pains to conceal his times of fasting according to the advice he gave his followers in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:16-18) and he certainly expected that his disciples would fast after he had left them. (Matt 9:14-15 cp. Mark 2:18-20). In a variant reading of Mk 9:29, when the disciples had proved to be unable to cure an epileptic boy, Jesus proceeded to do it and said that fasting must accompany prayer if it is to be effective in casting out certain demons, (Matt 6:16-18) and the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14) suggest that Jesus believed fasting was nothing if it did not lead to a personal relationship with his Father.

Two motives are suggested by the text for Jesus' forty day fast in the wilderness; first, to win from God a clear vision of what was entailed in the vocation experienced at his baptism (compare with Daniel 9) and secondly, in the process of doing that, to battle with and overcome the powers of evil (note variant reading of Mark 9:29). The clarity of vision which Jesus experienced at this time

must have been connected to the length of his fast as well as to the depth of his prayer. In that way, therefore, he is not unlike some other visionaries mentioned above. However, in the motives for and content of his experience, he seems to be very different from them in that he did not himself choose to undergo the time of fasting and testing for personal reasons. He was 'driven' to it by the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:12).

Fasting in Christianity

Jesus expected his followers to fast after he left them (Mark 2:19ff). Acts 13:1-3 mentions fasting together with prayer in seeking guidance on an important matter. Fasting with this purpose in mind is practised by some Christians today, especially those of the Evangelical wing of the Church. A reference by St. Ignatius suggests that it may also have been a practice of the later Middle Ages. He says that penances, including fasting, may be performed because the penitent wants *the solution of some doubt that is in his mind*. There is no reason to believe that here Ignatius was not drawing on known ideas.

Paul (1 Corinthians 9:27) appears to use fasting as a means towards overcoming evil in himself. This motive for fasting, following Paul's teaching and the example of Christ, became particularly important for the Church from the earliest days. In the beginning, fasting meant complete abstinence from food for all or part of a day. In the *Didache* (Teaching) a short Christian document dating from the late first or early second century in rural Syria, Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days. About 400AD Saturday was substituted for Wednesday. That fast day was abolished in more recent times. Also from very early times, there is evidence for a twenty-four hour fast before the celebration of the Christian Passover. This later developed into the keeping of Holy Week. Those preparing for baptism (Catechumens) fasted before their baptism (which was normally at Easter), for two days during the first three centuries, later for forty, and the Church fasted with them. This Lenten fast became obligatory only in

541AD. Later in the West, the forty days excluded Sundays. In the East both Saturdays and Sundays were excluded, leading to an appreciably longer Lent. From the third century at least, Christians fasted before every Eucharist.

Even in the earliest centuries, Christian writers made it plain that abstaining from food must be accompanied by changes in behaviour, such as giving to the poor or giving up anger. If abstinence benefited only the one who abstained, it fell short of its true purpose. The motive of overcoming evil received great impetus from the example of the Desert Fathers and Mothers from the late third century onwards. Fasting, often all day until nightfall, was combined with solitude in strenuous spiritual training ('ascesis' a word originally used for athletic training). The aim was to place God instead of self at the centre of each life. Fasting was not only from bodily appetites, such as food or sex, but also from food harmful to the soul – slander, anger, envy, or vainglory. The discipline also included vigils (reduction of the desire to sleep), reading (mainly of scripture) for those able to read, and frequent contrition for sins and failures of the past. The great monastic orders later regulated fasting for monks and nuns. The rule of St Benedict, for example, specifies Wednesdays, Fridays and the whole of Lent as fasts. One meal a day is allowed, in the late afternoon.

In the Mediaeval Church, there were two further forty-day periods of fasting, before Christmas and before Pentecost, though it is not clear whether every day in them was a fast day. Bede mentions these, but they seem to have died out in the West after the tenth century. Vigils, Ember Days, and Rogation Days, short fasts, of one to three days, were also added, during which people might be expected to survive on water alone. On longer fasts, they had one proper meal each day, with the possible addition of a light snack. However, there were many complicated rules allowing various classes of people to claim exemption from fasts. Often, the number and intensity of fasts observed varied from place to place in the West. In the late Middle Ages, the idea of conformity to the

sufferings of Christ became increasingly important as a motive for self-discipline.

A major expansion of the idea of fasting to overcome evil within and without came with the Desert Fathers, beginning with St. Anthony. He retired to the desert in 285 A.D. to fight against evil in himself and evil powers generally, by fasting and prayer in solitude. The movement grew rapidly after persecution ceased because there was perhaps a need to find another way of heroic discipleship. Eve Baker writes:

Early monks strove for 'purity of heart' (the blessed state in which one could see God, Matt 5: 8). To reach this state where God alone was the object of desire, they struggled with their instinctive desires for food and for sex. Mastering these was the object of their 'Asceticism'. Fasting was an important part of monastic asceticism; many of the desert monks would fast all day, eating only at nightfall [...] the aim of the monk was to proceed from the struggle with the appetites [...] to the contemplation of divine things. This involved the redirection of the personality to a different end from the merely instinctual gratification sought by all. Not only must bodily habits be disciplined, the whole mindset must be changed. The tools in this ascetic struggle were, in addition to fasting, 'vigils' (reduction of the desire of the body for sleep); 'reading' (mainly of the scriptures, for those who could read); and 'frequent compunction of the heart for remembered failures and deceptions'. [...]

There was also a further battle 'and let us not believe that an external fast from the visible alone can possibly be sufficient for perfection of heart and purity of body unless there has also been a fast of the soul. For the soul also has its harmful foods, slander, anger, envy, vainglory'. What is under attack here is the inner centre of the personality, the self regard which would raise not only the demands of the body, but the demands of the self image to

the first place in one's attention [...] the aim of the monk is to place God at the centre, a separation from the way of life as self-interest (Baker, Chap. 5, pp. 54-6).

The great monastic orders later regulated fasting for monks and nuns in their orders. The Rule of St. Benedict, for example, specifies Wednesdays, Fridays and the whole of Lent as fasts. One meal a day only is allowed, in the late afternoon. In the late Middle Ages, the idea of conformity to the sufferings of Christ became increasingly important as a motive for self-discipline. By the end of the Middle Ages, fasting had also come to be thought of as a way of acquiring the sort of merit which would make it easier to obtain eternal life.

St Ignatius and Fasting

In his *Spiritual Exercises* of the early sixteenth century, but still very popular today, aimed principally at those on retreat, Ignatius says the principal reasons for penitential acts, including fasting, are:

- 1) to make satisfaction for past sins;
- 2) to bring all our lower faculties into greater subjection to the higher;
- 3) to obtain some gift or grace that one earnestly desires.

He also gives guidance on our whole attitude to food and drink, suggesting that we should do well, when eating and drinking, to imagine ourselves at table with Christ and his apostles and aim to approach what we are doing with the mind of Christ. Various other practices would also be helpful;-

- 1). on the whole avoid rich tempting foods and learn to be content with plain fare.
- 2).cut back on the amount consumed to find out what the body really needs to remain healthy and efficient.
- 3) before becoming really hungry or thirsty decide how much to consume at the next meal and stick to it.

Fasting after the Reformation

The Church of England, the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches continued to observe fasts but denied that doing so was a means of acquiring eternal life. A Table of the Vigils, Fasts and Days of Abstinence to be observed in the Church of England can be found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, but there are no details about the way in which they are to be kept. They seem generally to have been observed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but the idea of fasting was weakened by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Later, it was revived in Britain by the Methodists in the eighteenth century and by the Tractarianism in the nineteenth.

John Wesley saw fasting as an act of love for God and said all Fridays in the year should be days of fasting or abstinence. In response to the argument that it is better to abstain from pride, vainglory, peevishness, anger and discontent than from food, he said:

Without question it is, but abstinence from food is a means to the greater end [...]. These little instances of self denial are the ways God has chosen wherein to bestow that great salvation (Rowell, pp. 183-7).

And in his sermon on fasting:

Let our intention herein be this, to glorify our Father which is in heaven; to express our sorrow and shame for our manifold transgressions of his holy law; to wait for an increase of purifying grace, drawing our affections to things above; to add seriousness and earnestness to our prayers; to avert the wrath of God; and to obtain all the great and precious promises which He hath made to us in Jesus Christ [...] Let us beware fancying we merit anything of God by our fasting [...]. Fasting is only a way in which God hath ordained wherein we wait for his unmerited mercy

(Wallis, p. 34)

Since Vatican II, the rules for fasting in the Roman Catholic Church have been reduced and simplified. Catholics have been encouraged to take Communion much more frequently and therefore the preceding period of fasting has been reduced to one hour only. The only fast days now laid down for Lent are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. This means one main meal at midday and a small 'collation' in the morning and evening. Friday abstinence is no longer obligatory but individuals are expected to find their own form of Friday penance.

The Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches had and have much stricter rules and more fasts. In the Ethiopian Church (Oriental family), which is particularly strict, clergy fast for 256 days a year, the laity for about 180. Fasting involves adopting a vegan diet and having no food at all until the end of the liturgy in the early afternoon. The only exemptions are for the very young, the very old and the sick.

Many Ethiopian Christians are appalled by the insignificant place given to fasting in the West. Their fasts are balanced by many more festivals than are customary in the West.

Possible Meanings of Christian Fasting Today

(list from *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* p 148)

Fasting is:

- 1) praying with the body, affirming the wholeness of the person in spiritual action (Rom 12:1-2);
- 2) giving emphasis and intensity to prayer, expressing hunger for God and his will;
- 3) asserting the goodness of Creation by means of a temporary surrender of enjoyment of some of its benefits. It should therefore include an element of thanksgiving;
- 4) a training in Christian discipline, especially against the sin of gluttony;
- 5) expressing penitence for the rejection and crucifixion of Christ by the human race;
- 6) a following of Jesus in the way of fasting;
- 7) the acceptance of the death of self in the death of Christ and therefore an act of faith in the Resurrection;
- 8) associated with almsgiving (at least since the Third Century) to prevent the practice from becoming self regarding.

Also, as Leo the Great (Pope 440-461) writing about Lent, says:

It will be an exercise in truly rational living, in the adaptation of oneself to the needs and duties of changing circumstances.

Contemporary Experiences of Fasting

Several people of different Faiths and Traditions have been kind enough to write to me about this as set out below. In order to get a measure of coherence amongst their replies, I asked them to include in what they said, if possible, the answer to three basic questions:

- 1) How did you come to this practice?
- 2) What does it entail for you?
- 3) What results do you think it has for you?

Christian Experiences

1) "I do not see fasting as 'a practice,' but as part of the general ascesis attached to the life of prayer. The fast of the soul is the more difficult part."

*Eve Baker, a modern "Solitary" living at home
and author of Paths in Solitude.*

2) "I used to undertake a twenty-four hour fast. I found it a helpful practice and a good means of practising the presence of God."

The Rt. Revd David Young

3) "I began fasting when I became a Christian and a member of an Evangelical church. There it was expected that everyone would fast as they did in the Early Church and there was teaching about it. The fast consisted in not eating food for a period of time. The aim was to hear more clearly what God was saying to us, as a church and as individuals, and to show God we were serious about following him by putting the needs of our bodies in second place. Sometimes the Vicar would call a Church Fast, perhaps for guidance, perhaps for repentance concerning things that had gone wrong in particular areas of church life. People would be asked to fast and pray individually. The church building would be open all day for prayer with a leaflet provided to give some ideas

for the prayer.

Sometimes there would be a night of prayer led by one person throughout. Others would come in to pray for two or three hours at a time. Afterwards, people would report back to the vicar on what they thought God was saying to the Church. I myself fast and pray about once a month for about twenty-four hours. I dread the experience, as I love food.

The fast begins after the evening meal and continues until that meal the next evening. During that time, I drink water or weak tea and make sure I have nothing specific to do, especially not driving. This is partly because I come to feel quite weak and because I want to focus on God, to hear what he is saying to me and maybe to others. I usually begin the day by taking Communion and dedicating myself and the day to God and his purposes. During the day, I aim to go with the flow of what God wants to happen. I stay for a while in church looking at something beautiful. Then, I may read the Bible or other spiritual book, listen to a taped sermon, go for a walk or just bask in God's presence. Sometimes I feel a heightened perception, being taken to another level, a closeness to God, even what some have described as ecstasy. Sometimes I start writing and can't stop while God tells me things, for example about my life. Sometimes it's a hard struggle and I feel very dry and wonder what it all was for. Generally, I find that after a day or two things become more clear in the area I had been praying about."

Anon

4) "I fast for about thirty-six hours at a stretch, beginning last thing at night, and do this whenever I have to sort out a problem. During the fast, I eat nothing, drink only water and pray every hour, on the hour. I concentrate on the problem, lifting it to God. It is a kind of pleading with him, asking for his guidance and help. [...] Fasting intensifies the prayer for me. When there is a problem, my wife prays with me each morning. [...]"

Sometimes the response to prayer is quite sudden. More usually, it takes time for our way to become clear.”

The Revd John Aston

5) “I have fasted for forty days but a long time ago, when I first became a Christian. [...] I am not someone who normally can go for long periods without food. Even when younger I needed some sugar input. Nowadays, I can just about manage a day without feeling giddy. During the forty-day fast, I went on working and if my blood sugar level really became a problem, I would suck the sugar coating off a piece of gum. Several times also, I had a few sips of tomato juice. [...] I drank water as I do when fasting now. I cannot remember if I drank any coffee.

This was the beginning for me of taking fasting seriously. There is a point where things become incredibly clear and faith seems stronger, so fasting became a natural weapon to use if there was a mountain ahead. It was also the beginning of listening to God and trying to obey. [...] My health remained good and returning to normal presented no problems, as I recall. I was given very good advice on the diet to follow when coming out of a prolonged fast.”

Elaine Aston

6) A Week of fasting at IBM

“The Christian Fellowship has existed at IBM in Basingstoke for many years. [...] Usually three or four attend meetings. In 2001, these agreed there was a need for us, personally and corporately, to draw closer to the heart of God and deeper into the purpose He has for each one of us and for IBM in Basingstoke. We felt that prayer and fasting would be an excellent way to take our focus off the distractions of the world and to focus on God. During this working week, our desire was to deepen our relationship with God, to prepare for a breakthrough in IBM, to seek direction for 2001 and to do battle against the strongholds (*of Evil*) in the workplace. We encouraged everyone to take part in the fasting to the degree they would be comfortable with.

The suggested fast was as follows:- Sunday (sundown) to Thursday (sundown) exclude all rich foods and meat, main meals to be fruit and vegetables: if possible, no tea, coffee or alcohol. Thursday (sundown) to Friday (sundown) complete fast, that is water only. At lunchtime each day, we had a prayer meeting to pray through the topics listed above. On Friday, we met for a time of worship and prayer in a room provided by the local church. So how was it? [...] We were all encouraged by a sense of the Holy Spirit at our meetings. Personally, I felt a real closeness to God develop during the week. The ongoing discipline kept my thoughts and prayers on that which is Holy.

Controlling food intake was no real problem but doing without my normally frequent cups of tea and coffee led to a nagging headache which became a sciatica type pain down my back, keeping me awake at night. After three days, the symptoms disappeared. There was a certain light-headedness on the final day. [...] I can see that fasting should always be under the guidance of someone else or in a group and, also, that fasting is not a short cut to God but fasting WITH PRAYER can allow us to know Him more fully.”

Chris Harris

7) “I was inspired by the self-denial of St. Francis to take on fasting as self-discipline. When I fast, usually once a week, I concentrate on those who are in need. The parable of the loaves and the fishes must be about those who had food sharing with those who had not. Also, Jesus said, ‘When I was hungry you fed me’. In the early days of the Church, when fasting at Advent, in Lent and at other times was established, ordinary people had little enough to eat anyway, so fasting was probably not too popular. However, for most of us food is plentiful. Many of us will readily go on a diet for the good of our health but are not so good at fasting which we are told is good for us spiritually. People in need are all around us so it should not be too difficult to share our food, time and talents, or perhaps one of them. One of the things which fasting does is to make us think of the less fortunate.”

Veronica Wynn, Tertiary

8) “Unless the period of fasting is specifically linked to praying, a special intention or intercession, I can’t do it or it becomes something different. So I have learnt that fasting and prayer are very closely linked. Fasting for me can be going without food or withdrawing from something good and enjoyable in order to focus on God. It seems to help me to be more God-centred and less self-centred, for that time. I can manage it only for a fairly short time. It also seems to help me in keeping open and receiving from God, as if the inner physical emptiness emphasises the spiritual emptiness we can offer to God. [...] I have also read of an American who gave up watching the late night movie every day and spent the time in prayer. The outcome was that he was called to and enabled to set up a centre to help young drug addicts come off their addiction.”

A Tertiary

9) “I have not fasted from food for some years. When I did the motives were probably mixed: a) Because the Church and Franciscanism encouraged it [...] as part of self-denial; b) As a discipline; c) To see if I could. Was this pride? d) To help detachment from material things.

I think that unless you fast regularly, you can become too focussed on the mechanics [...]. How am I doing? I have from time to time, during Lent, fasted from other things which were perhaps becoming too important, the most difficult being light reading in the shape of novels. I try to be aware of anything becoming more important than loving and caring. No doubt, regular fasting would make that second nature.

Angela Fisher, Tertiary.

10) “I fast from food for twenty-four hour periods, Shrove Tuesday to Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday to Good Friday and on the Third Order ‘Day of Penitence’. [...] I also miss a midday meal once a week. During fasts I used to drink only water but in recent years this has led to headaches so now I include some hot drinks as well. I find fasting concentrates the mind. I do not like fasting

but I know I should because I/we have too much in the world and it is important to know something of what it is like to be hungry. Through fasting, I feel cleaned out mentally, physically and spiritually and more able to value what I have. After fasting, the first piece of toast tastes particularly good! Fasting also makes me more conscious of prayer but I do not think it helps me to pray better.”

A Tertiary

11) *A contemporary First Order Brother quotes the Rule of 1223 and writes:*

“Whether all friars fast from All Saints is a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless it is fair to assume that most friars fast during the season of Lent. It has been a practice in most of our houses to observe a fast of sorts on Friday, i.e. a bowl of soup at lunch (the main meal) rather than a cooked meal. Glasshampton has for many years observed what is known as a “stand up tea.” This is just a cup of tea drunk in silence and whatever time is left over from the half hour is spent in prayer.

As for myself, I have for quite a number of years now observed a fast day on Fridays throughout the year. My day on Friday begins with Morning Prayer and meditation followed by breakfast. This consists of porridge, Ryvita and tea. My fast begins after breakfast and I do not eat again until breakfast time on Saturday morning. It is a day I enjoy, no need to worry about time for cooking the next meal etc. Naturally I drink plenty of liquid, tea, coffee, water and lemon barley to flush the kidneys. Exercise of the bowels is a bi-product, a healthy aspect. During Lent, Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days, following the same pattern. More time can be given to prayer than would normally be possible.

This is an essential, necessary and natural part of a fast day. At the end of Lent, I calculate how much I would have spent on food and fuel for cooking it. Then the amount saved is divided into

three and sent to charities. Fasting, prayer and charitable giving together, rather than fasting for its own sake, give a sense of purpose to the exercise.”

Brother Nathanael SSF

(*Note;* In Franciscan houses where the brothers or sisters are generally sharing meals with residents or guests, days of total fasting from food are really not possible.)

Experiences of People of Other Faiths

Judaism

“Fasting on **Yom Kippur** is mentioned in the Old Testament and is regarded as a direct command of G-d for us. It is the only fast that is also a ‘holiday’, that is a day on which we cannot work, like the Sabbath. It is observed from sunset to the following nightfall, a period of about twenty-five hours. It is a full day in synagogue for repenting and is still called a holiday. It is not a sad day. Fasting is meant to focus the mind. [...]

The only other twenty-five hour fast is **9 Av.** a very sad day commemorating the destruction of both temples. The date is supposed to be a dangerous one for the Jewish people. Jewish Law has six “minor” fasts as well, which means for the daylight hours only, twelve to eighteen hours depending on the time of year. [...]

I fast because it was handed down to me as a rule, but it is used a lot in the Bible as a mark of repentance and praying. It consists of nil by mouth, not even water. It gets much easier as you get older and if you add together what you eat before and after, you are no worse off! I stay in synagogue on Yom Kippur as I like to focus for a day without being contactable by phone etc, as I would be at home. Some people get bad headaches or dizziness. Others just lie in bed but that makes the fast easy and to me seems to make nonsense of a day of mourning.

Yom Kippur is the only day on which I fast all the time I am in synagogue. I think about things, myself, my conduct, plans etc. so it a good focus for me. However, I think this is more because I am in synagogue all day than that I am fasting.”

*A Jew of the Orthodox, Ashkenazi
(Eastern European) tradition.*

“Yom Kippur is maintained as a strict fast day by virtually everyone who regards themselves as part of the community, even on its Liberal or Reform wings. [...] Lev 16:30 states it to be the day on which *God will forgive you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord.* I will quote from Friedlander’s *The Jewish Religion* ... ‘*a day of resting, fasting, prayer and spiritual improvement*’. Further, *The phrase, ‘You shall afflict yourselves’ (Lev 23;31 and 32) is explained by Tradition to signify the total abstinence from all kinds of food and the gratification of other bodily desires (Mishnah Yoma 8;1). The reason may be the following: The principal source of sin is the gratification of our bodily appetites. ‘Return’ (ie, repentance) must therefore include the earnest attempt to control and, where necessary, to suppress such appetites. Fasting is such an attempt. But it must be borne in mind that fasting is only one of the duties which we have to fulfil on the Day of Atonement and the other duties are equally essential.*”

Friedlander then goes on to specify four essential steps in ‘return’ (T’shuvah): consciousness of sin; confession of sin; (which on Yom Kippur takes the form of communal rather than individual expression); regret; and ‘amendment’, i.e., firm and genuine resolve not to sin again. [...] There are strict ordinances against fasting when there is any risk to health or related reason.

All the other fasts commemorate actual or potential historical tragedies for the Jewish people. Yom Kippur therefore has a quite unique significance and I think this is still recognised by the community. What does it mean for a Jew today? Well, it is undoubtedly felt as a solemn occasion. The service begins at sunset the evening before with the famous Kol Nidrei prayer. This is itself curious. The prayer asks for forgiveness for vows to God that could not, for some reason, be fulfilled. This might seem a technicality but represents one of the most moving occasions in the Jewish religious year, helped by the ancient and haunting melody to which it is sung, repeated twice with steadily increasing volume.

It is said that attendance at this prayer has returned backsliders to the community [...]. During the twenty five hours fast from food and drink, the sheer repetitiousness of the liturgy provides ample opportunity for even the least reflective to think about the past year and their role in it. Despite the emphasis on relationship to God, customs grew up regarding relationship towards mankind. It became accepted, for instance in Eastern Europe, for quarrelling parties to make peace before Yom Kippur. It must however be admitted that there is little sanction in the Bible or in Rabbinic literature to back this up. Nevertheless, custom, (Minhag, in Hebrew) is regarded by Tradition as effectively binding.”

Prof. Simon Baumberg, a Jew of the Masorti persuasion (a form of liberal semi-orthodoxy).

Islam

“Fasting is one of the ‘Five Pillars of Islam’. These are the fundamental constituents of Muslim life. They are requirements of God and could not therefore be more important. They consist of

- a) **ash-Shahada**, the witness;
- b) **Salat**, formal prayer;
- c) **Zakat**, contribution of two and a half percent of one’s assets to the poor;
- d) **Hajj**, Pilgrimage to Mecca;
- e) **Sawm**, fasting during Ramadan.

Every Muslim must observe Ramadan unless there are health reasons. As I was born in Islam, fasting is a fundamental part of my life. Fasting consists in not eating or drinking from dawn to sunset whilst all the time remaining cheerful and courteous. This is very difficult but it fortifies the body and the spirit, balances the Being and puts you in God’s eyes of Love. It also activates the sense of moderation, justice and generosity.”

Dr Reefat Drabu

(The *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* points out that generally speaking asceticism is rather suspect in Islam as it is in Judaism, despite the fact that Ramadan is of such importance, because it would seem to deny the goodness of God's creation.)

Buddhism

“Traditional Theravada Buddhist practice enjoins both lay and ordained meditators to practise *moderation in eating* in the recognition that food for some can become an excessive concern. As you may know, ordained monks and nuns (actually ‘postulants’, as the nuns’ order officially died out some time ago) usually eat only one meal a day, at midday. From experience, I can say that this practice has considerable benefits, and some disadvantages.

Reducing the amount of time and effort spent on obtaining, preparing and eating food leaves much more time available for other matters, one of which may be meditation, if one's training is in that area, or scholarship, if the focus is on study. Further, with only one allowed mealtime each day, excessive concern about eating often diminishes in proportion. There is allowance made for a breakfast of rice gruel or similar which, on occasions, has been known to become very substantial, especially in cold weather – which brings me to the disadvantages.

In a cold/temperate climate, it helps to start the day with some food. Here, those in training have three meals a day (a light breakfast and lunch and a substantial dinner) while keeping portions moderate and allowing no eating whatever in between. We have found that both full-time students (ordained or lay) and lay mediators on retreat find this satisfactory and good support for their meditative practice.

Of course, for some individuals on retreat, even this restriction can prompt great concern about the next meal. Will it be enough? Will I like what I am given? What if I cannot eat it? All of which

can be grist for the meditative mill if approached properly. On a personal note, I once fasted for ten days but cannot say I gained anything worthwhile, other than proving I could do it. It seems to me that it is much more valuable to bring the desire for food under control on a regular day by day basis.”

*Alan James,
The House of Inner Tranquillity, Bradford on Avon.*

(According to the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, the Buddha experienced great ease and comfort as a prince in his early life. Later, in his quest for enlightenment, he lived a life of extreme austerity. Then he came to realise that neither way of life helped him towards the liberation from material things which he sought. Realising at last that a harmonious relationship between mind and body was essential, he chose the middle way between the two extremes. In Buddhism therefore fasting in the sense of complete abstention from food, is regarded with a certain suspicion.)

Dorothy Dennis

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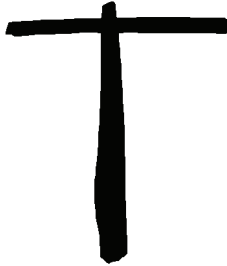
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*Where possible, quotations from Franciscan Documents are referred to the books above as being more generally available to Tertiaries than are the three volumes of *The Early Documents*.

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