

## On Liturgical Fasting

David W. Fagerberg

---

You've heard an old saying that "those who can, do; those who can't, teach." This strikes me as particularly apt in today's situation. I'd like to speak about fasting, but I'm no particular expert in practice. Nobody has to worry they'll feel guilty as a result of my personal story. Rather, I'd like to go to the liturgical tradition and discover what theological truths lie there. My hypothesis is quite simple: there can be many reasons for fasting, but only one reason for the liturgical fast, and of that reason we are informed by Scripture. "Man shall not live by bread alone." The liturgical fast inducts us into that scriptural wisdom about the relationship of God, man, and matter.

I say there are many other reasons to fast, and with a little reflection you can think of as many as I can. People fast for health reasons (like when your cholesterol is too high), for medical reasons (like before a blood test), for reasons of vanity (like the magazines encourage), for athletic purposes (like the coach insists), for moral reasons (in protest of practices of animal husbandry), for religious reasons (all religions use fasting as a tool), and there is even restraint from food that comes from mood swings (like depression or anorexia). But just as the fast of the hospital patient is different from the fast of the supermodel by reason of motive and end, so, too, the liturgical fast is different from all other fasts by its purpose and *telos*. And its reason for being is biblically explained: "Man shall not live by bread alone."

I pause to note that this is a fine example of Jesus confirming the Word of God. We sometimes see only points of contrast between the two testaments, but here is a lived point of congruence between the Old Testament and the New Testa-

ment. This wisdom appears in Deuteronomy 8 and is quoted by Jesus in Matthew 4. It is, in fact, more than quoted: it is lived by Jesus. Jesus is the confirmation of every truth revealed in Scripture, including this one. He is the new Adam and shows in his person the anthropological truth bespoken in Deuteronomy: He did not live by bread alone, but by every word which came from His Father's mouth.

To explore my hypothesis, I shall try to do three things: (a) describe what I mean by the phrase "liturgical asceticism," of which fasting is a concrete expression; (b) describe repentant fasting as a therapeutic struggle with sin; and (c) describe fasting as liturgical act.

### *Liturgical Asceticism*

To understand what I mean by the term "liturgical asceticism," a twofold correction is required, one to the term "liturgical" and the other to the term "asceticism." It is common to define liturgy as the 55 minutes on a Sunday morning, as rubrics and *ordos*, as incense and vestments. And it is common to define asceticism as paucity, starkness, and painful severity. If we were to leave the definitions at that, then the phrase "liturgical asceticism" would seem to mean austere church decor, or frugally performed rites, or the pain of putting up with badly done ritual. I should instead like to dilate both terms in order to deepen the meaning of the conjoined phrase.

First, I want to expand the word "liturgy." The public and corporate liturgy is the Church's faith in motion, as Aidan Kavanagh used to say. But the ritual is just the tip of the liturgical iceberg. Robert Taft writes, "the purpose of all Christian liturgy is to express in a ritual moment that which should be the basic stance of every moment of our lives."<sup>1</sup> I suggest that liturgy is participation in the circulation of love between the divine persons of the Trinity. That communion of interpenetrating life which revolves between the three persons was called *perichoresis* by the Greeks and *circumincessio* by the Latins,

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Taft, "Sunday in the Byzantine Tradition," *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1997), 52.

and man and woman were created toward the end of participating in the Trinity's perichoresis. We are liturgical beings designed for deification, opened up to mankind by the hypostatic union of the human and divine natures in Jesus of Nazareth. Liturgy is the ongoing saving work of God's only-begotten Son. Liturgy is cosmic in scope and eschatological in ambition. This fallen world has become subject to various powers and principalities, world rulers and evil spirits (Ephesians 6), but into it has come a new power, a new principle, a new *arché*. There is a new priest, a supreme *iereus*, practicing a ministry of reconciliation in heaven. It was prepared for through the service rendered by the house of Israel, and this *arché* irrupted into history with Christ's ministry, and it is continued in his body the Church.<sup>2</sup> His ministry is an *iereus arché*, and into His hierarchy Christ initiates His disciples.

Christ initiates His people into His work. The term "liturgy" comes from *leitourgia*, which meant a work (*ergeia*) done by a few on behalf of a people (*laos*). Christ did a work for the reconciliation of mankind, and that work is now shared by His liturgical apprentices. The work done at liturgy by Christ's holy people is the perpetuation of Christ's own sacrificial priesthood. His life in the Father is shared with His people, and spiritually active by the power of the third person of the Trinity. This is a people called out – which is the meaning of the Greek word for Church, *ekklesia*. We are called out by Christ, for Christ, through Christ, around Christ, under Christ, or, best of all, "with Christ." Taft writes:

To express this spiritual identity, Paul uses several compound verbs that begin with the preposition *syn* (with): I suffer with Christ, am crucified with Christ, die with Christ, am buried with Christ, am raised and live with Christ, am carried off to heaven and sit at the right hand of the Father with Christ. ... This seems to be what Christian liturgy is for St. Paul. Never once does he use cultic nomenclature (liturgy, sacrifice, priest, offering) for anything but a life of self-giving,

---

<sup>2</sup> On priesthood as ministry of reconciliation, see Avery Dulles, *The Priestly Office: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).