



Fasting

Replace what you “give up” with something truly better in God’s eyes

By Julie McCarty

I’m probably the last person who should write about fasting. Just mention the word and my mind fills with delectable images of chocolate-frosted donuts, candy bars, and potato chips draped luxuriously around a bowl of onion dip. Face it: when it comes to performance ratings in fasting, I’m in the lowest percentile.

In the classic work *Confessions*, Saint Augustine writes about his struggles to control various appetites in his life. Although many of us know of Augustine’s struggle with sexual desires, probably few realize he also wrestled with his appetite for food. Augustine noticed that while one might give up sexual encounters altogether, it would be impossible to live without food and drink. The problem, he found, was that when he ate what he needed to stay healthy, he soon wanted to eat still more just for pleasure, and then he found himself gradually skipping down the path of over-indulgence. To eat moderately is more difficult than going to one extreme (trying to starve yourself) or the other (gluttony).

Augustine’s thoughts on food make me think about the place of food in my life, and about the Lenten fasting and abstinence rules for Catholics. Why do we fast? Why do we abstain from meat? What is the spiritual meaning behind these customs?

My questions began one Lenten day several years ago when my husband Terry and I, exhausted after a busy work week, went to a popular seafood restaurant. We had never been to this place, and we went early, hoping to avoid the crowd of Catholics seeking fish on Friday. When we arrived, the lobby was already jammed with people waiting for tables. Some were sitting at the bar, sipping wine and looking over menus of lobster, crab legs, and other elegant seafood creations. As we stood in the long wait for a table, Terry and I began to feel very uncomfortable. Something was tugging our consciences: Is this the true spirit of Lenten penance, enjoying cocktails and refined dining?

Sixteen centuries ago, Augustine observed a similar phenomenon. In a homily, Augustine wrote about some people of his day who were giving up their ordinary table wine as a Lenten penance. In place of wine, these people were drinking more costly, exotic liquors, ones so rare even the wine-dealers had never seen them. Augustine points out the ridiculousness of this practice, noticing that instead of rejoicing at Easter, such people would surely be downcast because of having to give up exquisite liquors to return to ordinary wine. Augustine preached that those who gave up wine for Lent ought to replace it with water, the drink of the poor. He even went so far as to say if your body can’t tolerate water (!), then you might as well drink wine. That would be more appropriate than drinking exquisite liquors during Lent.

Augustine reminded people that the point of fasting or abstinence from certain foods is not only to grow in self-control, but also to become more aware of the plight of the poor, who face an empty stomach every day. He taught that what we save by not eating certain foods should be given to the hungry.

Augustine's words still ring true today. The spirit of Lent involves replacing what we "give up" with something *better*. What good is giving up television if one becomes addicted instead to computer games or surfing the web? If we give up television, we can use the time saved for many other good things: reading to our children, praying, visiting lonely people, romancing one's spouse, getting more sleep or exercise, or volunteering at a homeless shelter. If we give up candy, we can eat apples instead. If we give up rude, crude, or mean-spirited comments, we can focus our communication on listening to others and saying words that build bridges between people.

All that we do during Lent must be done for a good purpose. In this spiritual season, we reflect more deeply on Christ, who was willing to die on the cross out of love for us. We seek to become more like Jesus, the Son of God, who cared immensely for the poor, the lonely, the lost, and the broken-hearted. In doing so, we prepare for the celebration of Easter joy with genuine love of God and each other. This is the true spirit of Lent.

