



The Sunday Gospels of Lent and the Church's Understanding of Fasting

Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty

The Sundays Gospels of Lent reveal the church's understanding of the concept of fasting and what the Church invites us to think about as we journey through the fast.

1. Preparation Sunday: Nothing should occupy our minds or hearts while we prepare for fasting, except encountering God, our Heavenly Father. By fasting, we enter new depths with our relationship with God. It is required on the Sunday before lent to take away from ourselves every bondage to food and drink. On that Sunday, the Church offers us a positive joyful perspective, the hidden encounter with our Heavenly Father. The Church recites to us the biblical passage that specifically tackles the pillars of Christian worship, as Christ presented to us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:1-18). Here, we see that through charity, prayer and fasting as a sacrifice of love, should be offered secretly to the Heavenly Father behind closed doors so that we can taste God's love. As our Heavenly Father takes the initiative of offering us love, we return that love with our love.

At the end of lent, the Church offers us the gospel chapters on Palm Sunday showing the entrance of Christ to Jerusalem. If we begin the fast by declaring our deep and secret attachment to God our Father, then as we conclude the fast, we will see Christ in our hearts transforming our depths into His beloved Jerusalem and His divine kingdom. Fasting, in reality, does not aim to deprive us of food but rather to hunger, thirst for God, and fellowship in the heavenly banquet.

2. Sunday of the Treasures: On the first Sunday of Lent, the Church offers us a special chapter on the heavenly treasure that enriches our hearts (Matthew 6:19-33). The purpose of fasting is for us to possess the heavenly treasure - "the Lord Christ" who is our divine treasure (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Saint Augustine says: "My poor soul, what do you seek?!"
If you need wisdom, you will find Christ the source of wisdom and its spring.
Indeed, He is Wisdom Itself!

If you ask for power and might, He is the Almighty!
If you seek pleasure and happiness, He is the spring of true joy!
If you yearn to get drunk, His love intoxicates the soul.
If you hunger for bread, He is the Bread of life!
If riches charm you, He is the Creator of all things!
If you seek rest, you will only find in Him your comfort!
Accept Him for you will find no other to satisfy you!”

3. Temptation Sunday: The new depths we enjoy when getting to know our Christ, the treasure of our hearts and our source of satisfaction, evokes the enemy against us so he wages spiritual wars and temptations against us. But if only we were to clothe ourselves with Christ who fasted in the wilderness, whom the angels came to serve Him after His temptation (Matthew 4:11) that we may enjoy their service. Fasting is an invitation to enjoy the victory of the crucified Christ in our war against the devil.

Saint Evagrius Ponticus offers us a wonderful text talking about diabolic wars and how to face them; he says: [I went to Saint Macarius, and asked him about the ideas that Satan is fighting me with ... So when he started talking to me, His face lit up more than the light of the sun and when I could no longer look at his face, I fell on my face, so he extended his hand and got me up.]

4. Sunday of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). Through fasting, we prepare ourselves to be served by angels and at the same time to offer our repentance to God. We find our Heavenly Father running towards us, falling on our necks, greeting us, and embracing us. This parable reveals God’s caring fatherhood. Even though a person is not obliged to return to Him, when He sees him from afar, he runs quickly towards him without confronting or reproaching him but to fall on his neck and greet him. He listens to the confession of his son but does not allow him to be humiliated. He does not let him say: "Make me like one of your hired servants." Instead, he ordered his best robe and his ring, honoring him with a great feast in his home! **Saint Ambrose** says:

[He hears you converse in the secret of your soul and when you are still far away, He sees you and runs. He sees in your heart; He runs, so that no one will delay you; He kisses too. His encounter is his prescience; his embrace is his clemency, and the demonstrations of his paternal love.

He throws himself on your neck to get you up, loaded with sins and turned towards the earth, you go back to heaven to seek your author. Christ throws himself on your neck, to free your neck from the yoke of slavery and to suspend the heavy yoke at your neck (Matt. 11:30)...He throws himself on your neck, when he says, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you" (Matt. 11:28).¹ That's the way He hugs you, when you repent.]

St. Augustine says: [When there is an increasing conflict with the devil, we must fast so that the body can fulfill the Christian duty in its war against the worldly desires, by repentance and urging the soul to be victorious in humility!]

5. Sunday of the Heavenly Wedding (John 4): Through our repentance, we return to the bosom of the Father and enjoy the heavenly wedding. For the Samaritan Women, who was never satisfied with her five husbands or with her family, found her true spiritual fulfillment in Christ. So, she left her waterpot and set out to call everyone in her city to enjoy this inner satisfaction which she experienced (John 4). **St. John Chrysostom** says: [She came to draw water, and when she had lighted upon the true Well, she after that despised the material one; teaching us even by this trifling instance when we are listening to spiritual matters to overlook the things of this life and make no account of them...without the command of any, leaves her water pot, and winged by joy performs the office of Evangelists. And she calls not one or two, as did Andrew and Philip, but having aroused a whole city and people, so brought them to Him.]²

¹On Luke 15: 11-32.

²Hom. on John, 34: 1

6. Sunday of the Crippled Man: When we become betrothed to the Lord Christ, as the Apostle Paul says: “For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2), we unite with the Physician of our souls and bodies. He heals you as He healed the paralyzed man at Bethesda (John 5).

7. Sunday of the Man Born Blind (John 9): He who enjoys the Heavenly Physician’s work is blessed with an open sight that sees and touches the divine mysteries. It is the gift of the heavenly bridegroom who offers His mysteries to His bride!

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem says: [Jesus then means in Hebrew ‘Saviour’ but in the Greek tongue ‘The Healer’ since He is Physician of souls and bodies, curer of spirits, curing the blind in body, and leading minds into light, healing the visibly lame, and guiding sinners’ steps to repentance, saying to the palsied, *Sin no more, Take up your bed and walk*. For since the body was paralyzed with the sin of the soul. He ministered first to the soul that He might extend the healing to the body. If, therefore, any one is suffering in soul from sins, there is the Physician for him: and if anyone here is of little faith, let him say to Him, Help my unbelief. Mark (9:24) If any is encompassed also with bodily passions, let him not be faithless, but let him draw near for to such diseases Jesus also ministers and let him learn that Jesus is the Christ.]³

8. Lastly, Palm Sunday: As we journey through Lent, we start Holy Week (the Pascha Week). The Church presents the Gospels concerning the entry of the Lord Christ to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This is when our Christ descends into our hearts, His beloved Jerusalem, implanting His cross in it and granting it the power of His Resurrection so that we can practice the eternal heavenly feast.

³Catechetical Lecture 10

Saint Matthew the Evangelist says: [And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, “Who is this?” So the multitudes said, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.” (Matthew 21:10-11). This is how our living Jesus enters our inner Jerusalem to establish His kingdom within us through the cross. The whole heart shifts, offering all its feelings and love to the new King. He will restore its peace and reconcile it with heaven and becomes a new heaven. As Christ entered Jerusalem, the children proclaimed the joyful kingdom of God. While the chief priests, through their anger, revealed the kingdom of evil which lacks peace. Father Moses says: [“Where the kingdom of God is, there certainly is eternal life, where the kingdom of the devil is, there surely is death and damnation, and there, in the words of the prophet, one cannot praise the Lord. ‘The dead will not praise you, Lord, nor those who have gone down into hell’—sinners no doubt — but we who live’—not in sin, nor in the world, but in God—‘we bless the Lord now and forever.’ (Ps 6:6).]⁴

⁴Cassian: Conf. 1:14.



Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty

Translated by:

Michael Stefanos

Christian Mourad

André Ghobrial

Mary F.A.

Maria Ghobrial

Miriam Fahim

Nicholas Mourad

Marianne Samuel

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notes.publications@gmail.com ✧