

Dear Fr. Kerper

How should we fast?

►► **Dear Father Kerper:** I struggle during the Lenten season, especially with the whole idea of fasting, which doesn't seem to mean much any more. Local seafood restaurants fill up on Friday evenings with Catholics fulfilling their no-meat-on-Friday "sacrifice." Lobster and chowder just don't seem too much of a sacrifice to me. Aren't these people hypocrites?

Your question about Lenten fasting and lobster-eating Catholics opens the door to a much weightier question: How can a Catholic move from legalism to a life of true Christian penance?

Let's begin with *legalism*, the tendency to believe that one achieves salvation primarily by observing laws. For sure, obeying just and reasonable laws, such as church rules about fast and abstinence, is a good thing. However, some people want to stop there, observing the minimal requirement just to avoid punishment.

Obedience, of course, is not the problem. The real danger is a *minimalist* attitude that keeps a person from moving beyond mere external practices to a real change of heart. That's what God offers us: transformation. After all, Jesus came to give us abundant life, not an eternal parole from Hell.

God's Word, as expressed by both testaments, clearly commands penance, specifically fasting; but not exclusively as a nasty penalty or test. Its real purpose is to empty us of ourselves so that God can "fill the hole," so to speak.

The free act of reducing, or totally eliminating, the consumption of food also fosters true humility by making us vividly aware of our total dependence on God. This "transformative fasting" is what Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist and other prophets did. Jesus himself, of course, fasted frequently. Such fasting was never legalistic; rather it was always integral to a deeper mystical experience.

Unfortunately, religious legalism obscures the true meaning of fasting. In some gospel texts Jesus confronts some opponents with the tension between the *spirit* and the *law* of fasting. As always, Jesus honors common religious practices while inviting people to a deeper spiritual experience.

Following the indisputable example of Jesus him-

self, Christians have practiced fasting from earliest times. Over the centuries, the church has codified this penitential practice, sometimes with rigorous precision, at other times with liberality.

These specific church regulations emphasize the value of fasting; they also foster unified penance by Catholics during Lent. But, as it was in the Lord's time, religious people continue to struggle with the "letter" and "spirit" of fasting.

This brings us to the "Lobster on Lenten Friday" syndrome. Without doubt, a Catholic who abstains from meat on Friday and enjoys a \$75 meal at an elegant seafood restaurant has observed church law *perfectly*. But the spiritual dimension is entirely lost. The same applies to "Lenten Weight Loss Programs." Though dieting and fasting may both melt off 10 or 15 pounds, they have entirely different motives. The purpose of Lent is to come closer to God, not to lose weight.

Here's another point to consider: the lobster eater has completely missed the necessary connection between fasting and almsgiving. In ancient Israel, food not consumed by fasting people rightly belonged to the poor, those on a "permanent fast." Fasting, thus, drew people closer to one another by allowing the well-fed to taste the hunger of the poor, and the poor to enjoy the food of the rich. In a small way, fasting promotes social justice.

By the way, the universal church still designates *every* Friday, not just Lenten Fridays, as "penitential days." And church law specifically identifies abstinence from meat as the *preferred* act of penance.



Current church law allows each national conference of bishops "to substitute other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety" for fasting and abstinence. Since 1966 the bishops of the United States have asked Catholics to select their own Friday penitential practices, one of which remains fasting and abstinence. Contrary to what many think, the church *never* abolished mandatory penance on Fridays. We are all obligated to do something.

You also asked whether the lobster-eating Catholics are hypocrites. We shouldn't jump to that conclusion. Instead, we should recognize that many Catholics, myself included, are "works in progress," content to do the minimum until guided to a deeper understanding of religious observance.

— Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Portsmouth.

If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail editor@parablemag.com.