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“Entering into Jesus’ Five-Fold Mercy in the Year of Mercy”

Retreat for Lay People

Casa Maria Retreat House of the Sister Servants of the Eternal Word, Irondale, AL

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### **Fasting and Being Filled with Hunger for God and with God’s Hunger**

- Today as we begin this retreat, the readings of the Church have a focus on fasting. This is a very good way to begin any retreat, because on retreat we first fast from various things of the world, leaving them behind. But we fast in order to be filled, and God wants to fill us something quite profound. Let’s enter into the readings the purpose of our fasting and the way in which God wants to help us feast which will orient us not merely on this retreat, not just in Lent but in life.
- Two days ago on Ash Wednesday, Jesus told us that he wanted us to fast differently from all the rest who look gloomy, neglect their appearance and even put white paste on their face to make them appear more pallid so that everyone else may recognize they’re fasting. Jesus tells us that the type of fasting he wants of us is meant to be done for and in communion with the Father who relates to us in secret. He wants us to anoint our head and wash our face so that no one will be able to notice that we’re fasting. God wants a different type of fasting from us.
- On the surface of today’s Gospel, Jesus implies that he was preaching but not practicing his teaching on fasting. Perhaps the rumors they may have heard were true that before his public ministry, Jesus had fasted for 40 days in the desert, but it didn’t appear that he and his followers were fasting at all now. That’s why the disciples of St. John the Baptist came to him to ask why his disciples weren’t fasting the way John and the Pharisees fasted. John, we know, was an heroic faster, living basically off of locusts and wild honey, and we can presume that many of his disciples were imitating his asceticism. Unlike the Pharisees who used to criticize Jesus and try to entrap him, John’s disciples seemed to have a genuine interest in the truth about what they needed to do and were shocked that Jesus and his disciples seemed to be lax when it came to this spiritual discipline. Delicately and respectfully, they asked Jesus why his *disciples* were not fasting, as if Jesus himself, the Lamb pointed out by John, might be an exception to any discipline followed by others. And Jesus gave us an important principle: “Can the sons of the wedding chamber [the loose translation “wedding guests” doesn’t do justice to the Greek, which I’ve translated literally above and can more loosely and accurately be translated groomsmen] mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast.”
- In giving us this principle, Jesus highlighted two things:
  - First, he identified himself, basically, as the long awaited Bridegroom of the People Israel described by the Prophets Isaiah and Hosea and defines the apostles as the groomsmen awaiting the time when the Bridegroom would go to meet the Bride and the bridesmaids and take them for the wedding reception. It was not a time of mourning — one of the two purposes of Jewish fasting, mourning over one’s sins; the other was supplication — but of celebration. Jesus points out here that the fundamental attitude of those who associate with him needs to be celebration at his presence. We Christians are sons of the wedding chamber heading toward the eternal wedding banquet and we need to be marked by the joy that always is associated by those in the wedding party.
  - Second, Jesus mentions that a time will come when the Bridegroom is violently ripped away from them — which happened in the Garden of Gethsemane and then on Calvary — and they would fast (and mourn) on that day like a bride if her husband were kidnapped or killed.
- The question we should ask as Christians, however, is why are we fasting *today*? Why do we fast throughout Lent? The Bridegroom who was ripped away for a time rose from the dead and returned 40 hours later. Before he ascended into heaven he assured us that he was going to be with us always until the end of time. The same Bridegroom is with us in the tabernacle who was with the disciples of John the Baptist and the sons of the wedding chamber in today’s Gospel. So why do we fast if the Bridegroom is with us? The reason is because, *even though he is with us, we’re not entirely with him*. Parts of us are in communion with him, and parts of us are not. The reason why we fast is to seek to bring those parts that are not united with him into union.

*Our fasting is to increase our hunger for what God hungers for, until every cell of our body desires what he desires.*

- That's the type of fasting God speaks about in the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. The Israelites were fasting but God wasn't pleased because they thought their going without food during daylight hours alone somehow was enough to get the Lord to listen to their prayers. God sent the Prophet Isaiah to sound his call to conversion so that they would grasp that the fasting the Lord desires is for them to hunger for what the Lord hungers. "Cry out full-throated and unsparingly," the Lord instructs Isaiah. "Tell my people of their wickedness. ... They ask me to declare what is due them, pleased to gain access to God [by their bodily prayers]. Why do we fast, [they ask], and you do not see it? Why do we afflict ourselves and you take not of it?"
- The Lord then responds to their questions. He says, because "on your fast day you carry out your own pursuits, [not mine], and drive all your laborers [rather than treat them with charity and mercy]. Your fast ends [not in communion and love but] in quarreling and fighting, striking with wicked claw," an image that brings to mind the way bears would attack each other to death. "Would that today you might fast so as to make your voice heard on high!" God loves them and wants to answer their prayers but not when they think all they need to do is abstain from food while continuing with unjust and evil practices contrary to his will.
- God then tells them what he hungers for and instructs them to the type of fast that will get them to hunger for the same things. "This is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, ... setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless, clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own." God wants us to be *starving* for what he starves, for us to release his sons and daughters imprisoned unjustly, breaking the yokes that bind them to slavery and servitude, feeding his hungry children, clothing the naked ones, and in a particular way caring for our family members. Jesus himself would say that he had come to set the captives free. He would personally identify with all of those in such circumstances, reminding us we would be judged on how we responded to him in disguise when he was hungry, or naked, or imprisoned, or sick. At the beginning of Lent, God wants to remind us that our fasting is meant to help us unite with those who fast everyday not be religious choice but by poverty and circumstances. It's not only meant to help us to understand their lot better and engender compassion but also meant to help us to feed them. The food we don't eat on a given day is not meant just to remain in our refrigerator for tomorrow but shared with those who have no food today. The purpose of our fasting is to unite with Christ those parts of us that are not yet hungering for what God hungers and through the Prophet Isaiah God tells us very clearly what he hungers for. And God wants us to be hungrier to care for the poor, needy and oppressed than someone who hadn't eaten for days would be for a piece of bread.
- Today as we come to Mass at the beginning of this Lenten retreat, Jesus, the Bridegroom, wants us to help us learn how to hunger for what he hungers. He wants to teach us how to fast so that our desires may grow to become more and more his desires. He doesn't want us to fast in a gloomy or mournful way, but in a joyous way, as sons of the wedding chamber, because to serve those in need should bring us joy. The Eucharistic fast we live is to hunger for this communion with the Lord, to desire him even more, and to desire and love him is to seek, desire and love what he seeks, desires and loves. So we come here with our longing. In response, the Bridegroom gives us something far greater than we could have ever desired on our own. He welcomes us not merely as sons of the wedding chamber but as the Bride herself as he prepares us for the consummation of the nuptial union of love, as we, on the altar that is the marriage bed of the union between Christ and the Church, prepare to receive within the body and blood of the Bridegroom, becoming one flesh with him. This is what we hunger for and the more we hunger for Jesus the more we will hunger for what he hungers and the more readily we will go out to continue his mission of caring for a world that starves for him.