

Observing Lent: Fasting and Bodily Preparation

By F. H. O. Jungkuntz

“Fasting and bodily preparation is, indeed, a fine outward training...” So pious and devout Lutheran Christians have been taught in the succeeding centuries since the Reformation, committing these words to memory as a part of their catechetical instruction (preparatory to Confirmation and admission to the Lord’s Supper for the first time). We are at once reminded that the balance of the statement reads, “...but he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.” While conceding the obvious emphasis in the statement, we are left to reckon with the equally evident fact that the latter clause neither negates nor neutralizes the former, so that we may assume that Lutheran catechumens are still instructed that “fasting and bodily preparation *is, indeed,* a fine outward training,” specifically, as this relates to the individual’s preparation for a profitable reception of the Sacrament, and ostensibly also, as a useful spiritual exercise for a salutary observance of Lent.

And yet, apart from dieting, which is much in vogue in contemporary American society, one is minded to question the extent to which “fasting” (i.e., the total or partial abstinence of food in general, or of certain foods and beverages in particular), and “bodily preparation” are still in evidence among us as spiritual disciplines in the preparing to commune or in observing Lent.

The entire question was precipitated by an encounter with a devout but disillusioned adherent of the Roman Catholic faith who, returning from Ash Wednesday Mass with the ashes and oil still fresh on her forehead observed sadly, “It just doesn’t seem much like Lent anymore. We don’t have to deny ourselves anything anymore!”

Tragic and pathetic is it not, that this blessed season of Lent that has been called, “The Holy of Holies” of the Christian Church Year, should somehow be equated with a person’s self-denial of material things?

Still, there is enough of this rationale also in Lutheran circles to raise the further question, “If this is *not* what Lent is all about, then how might one be advised properly to ‘keep’ Lent?” The prerequisites for a proper observance of Lent are comprehended in Scriptures such as these:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise (Psalm 51:17).

Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even unto Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments (Joel 2:12,13a).

Lent then is something deeply spiritual, concerned primarily with the faring of the soul and only incidentally with the affairs of the body. The over-riding theme of Lent is: “What *God* hath wrought!” The Christian’s Spirit-inspired, Spirit-filled, Spirit-impelled response to God’s great act of love, during Lent, is expressed in humble contrition and repentance, in renewal, in watchfulness and worship and prayer, and in sobriety of life and conduct.

And still it would seem that in a world gone berserk in self-indulgence, increasingly hell-bent upon committing spiritual suicide, in a world utterly polluted by sin and dominated by Satan and sacrilege, secularism and profanity, there is a place for “fasting and bodily preparation.

As for fasting, let the traditional posture prevail. Let no one imagine that in fasting he is doing God service. The practice, however salutary, is by no means meritorious. The rubric still applies:

If thy stomach gurgles; if thou feel lightheaded, woozy and faint, then for heaven’s and thy stomach’ sake, sit you down, say grace, partake of victuals,

and thank God for the sustenance! But, and if one desires unpretentiously to fast, finding it a helpful spiritual exercise, let him do so in good conscience.

Concerning further “bodily preparations” one confronts a veritable Pandora’s box. For example, and again, for centuries, Lutheran Christians have received the following instruction:

In the morning, when you get up... In the evening, when you go to bed, make the sign of the holy cross and say: In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen. Then kneeling or standing, repeat the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. If you choose, you may also say this little prayer ... whereupon follows either of the much-loved Morning and Evening Prayers of Dr. Martin Luther.

The value of “signing” or “blessing oneself” with the sign of the holy cross derives from the considerable assistance rendered the practitioner in orienting oneself to the matter at hand, viz., the individual’s personal and private devotion and prayer. In spite of the fact that our present Catechism does not include some of these instructions, the practice persists and remains to the present “fine outward training.”

The wearing of a cross, crucifix, or religious medal about the neck represents a form of “bodily preparation” practiced by an increasing number of devout Christians. The young Lutheran serviceman receives from his mother’s hand a small Sterling crucifix with the tender admonition, “Remember to Whom you belong, my son!” Both mother and son are fully aware that the cherished symbol of the Savior’s redemption is no “good luck” charm possessed of any power to protect the lad from physical harm and danger. Still, the boy would affirm that the crucifix about his neck powerfully reminded him of his Confirmation vow and comforted him mightily in moments of extreme moral peril and spiritual distress by serving to direct his thoughts to Scripture passages that in youth he had committed to memory. Nor is it impossible to cite and substantiate circumstances in which the wearing of a cross provided the solitary catalyst for occasions for Christian witnessing.

All things considered, a rather substantial case evolves for our continuing to give careful attention to the matter of “fasting and bodily preparation.” Properly employed, such disciplines serve the salutary purpose of leading one’s thoughts God-ward while our feet remain implanted on the ground where much elbow-rubbing with the world remains the Christian’s lot as he heeds the Master’s bidding both to “Come away” and “Be separate,” and yet to be “light” and “salt.”

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