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**Homily for Friday after Ash Wednesday
Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help**

March 7, 2014

We all know that a major component of Lent is fasting. Many people during the season of Lent will give up something in some form. The question is often, “What are you giving up for Lent?” or “What are you doing for Lent?” Often times after we get started we lose our focus, get a little frustrated or discouraged. When we get to the end of the season, we realize not much has happened. How many of us have experienced Lenten like this?

I think that fasting will become more important to us if we keep it in perspective and understand more clearly WHY we are doing it. The whole season of Lent is about the conversion of our hearts. I believe conversion is this: a reorientation of our hearts; the gradual shift from what I want for my life to a greater priority and preference for what God wants for my life.

Therefore, when we begin this process of conversion, we have to keep our practice of fasting in the proper perspective. It is not so much the action itself, but what is the final goal? What do we want to accomplish? What is the greater priority and preference for what God wants for my life? Tertullian said: *“Fasting possesses great power. If practiced with the right intention, it makes one a friend of God.”*

So what is our right intention? Perhaps one way of looking at this is asking ourselves a couple of questions: “Who is the person that I want to become? What are the changes that need to take place in my life that will help me become that person?”

If we keep the goal in sight and have the right intention, and are committed to daily prayer, then our fasting will be more consistent and will bear more fruit. We will become closer friends of God.

But first we have to decide if fasting is important to us personally. We live in a world today where our excessive indulgence in worldly pleasures draws us away from the spiritual life that God desires for us and we forget about the deeper aspirations of our heart that long for God.

Fasting then, reorients our worldly desires and leads us to that conversion, the gradual shift from what I want for my life to a greater priority and preference for what God wants for my life.

St. Augustine offers this: *“Fasting cleanses the soul, raises the mind to heaven, subjects one’s flesh to the spirit, renders the heart contrite and humble, scatters the clouds of concupiscence, quenches the fire of lust, and kindles the true light of chastity.”*

Fasting, connected with prayer, helps us take back control of our life. When our intellect and our physical desires appear to be more important than our spiritual desires and they take higher priority, it is time to fast. Through fasting, we control those physical appetites and gain strength in controlling our rebellious intellect.

As our fasting progresses and our prayer remains consistent, we begin to rearrange our priorities. The Lord works on our hearts and so the things which seemed to be essential before are now inconsequential in light of our changed perspective. Fasting promotes our spiritual thoughts by releasing them from the domination of our worldly desires. All of us are worldly in some way. But it is not just about giving up eating things or drinking things. There are certain attitudes and responses to life that must be tamed as well.

St. John Chrysostom shares this: *“Do you fast? Prove it by doing good works. If you see someone in need, take pity on them. If you see a friend being honored, don’t get jealous of him. For a true fast, you cannot fast only with your mouth. You must fast with your eye, your ears, your feet, your hands, and all parts of your body.”*

In fact what we heard from the prophet Isaiah today speaks to this.

“This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; 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.” [Isaiah 58:6-7]

So as we see, this type of fasting has nothing to do with giving up chocolate or coffee or beer or whatever else people give up during Lent. It is an attitude/way which leads to greater love.

If fasting is meant to lead us to the conversion, the reorientation of our hearts, then the final results will be a greater love for God and for others. That's how we know whether we are growing in a life of holiness, by how much we are growing in love. It is God himself who loves us into holiness. We must surrender our lives to it.

In the words of Pope Benedict: *“The faithful practice of fasting contributes, moreover, to conferring unity to the whole person, body and soul, helping to avoid sin and grow in intimacy with the Lord.... Through fasting and praying, we allow Him to come and satisfy the deepest hunger that we experience in the depths of our being: the hunger and thirst for God.”*

In the end, it is that deeper relationship with God that should motivate us to fast. God alone is the object of our spiritual fasting and only God can reward us for it.