



FASTING BEFORE HOLY COMMUNION



St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † February 2017

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ISSUE: Recently I was discussing the Lenten fasting and abstinence regulations with a friend. He told me that a person is supposed to fast one hour before receiving Holy Communion. I honestly have never heard that before. Can you clear up this matter for me?

DISCUSSION: Canon 919 of the *Code of Canon Law* states, “One who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain from any food or drink, with the exception of water and medicine, for at least the period of one hour before Holy Communion.” Actually, this regulation merely reflects an ancient tradition in our Church, which is even rooted in Judaism. In Acts of the Apostles (13:2), we find evidence of fasting connected with the liturgy. A more normative practice of fasting before receiving holy Communion appears throughout the Church after the legalization of Christianity in 313 A.D. St. Augustine attested to this practice in his own writings.

Granted, the specific requirements of the fast have changed over time. Prior to 1964, the Eucharistic fast began at midnight. On Nov. 21, 1964, Pope Paul VI reduced the fast to a period of an hour.

This rule has two exceptions: First, if a priest celebrated more than one Mass on the same day, as oftentimes happens on Sunday, he is only bound to the one hour fast before the first Mass. The priest may eat and drink something to keep up his strength in between Masses even though a full hour fast will not occur before the next reception of holy Communion.

Second, those who are elderly (at least 60 years of age) or sick as well as their caretakers can receive Communion even if a full hour fast has not been fulfilled. For example, people in the hospital are not in control of their own schedule and may be eating or have just finished eating when visited by the priest or Eucharistic minister. Therefore, the period of fast before receiving holy Communion is reduced to “approximately one quarter of an hour” for those who are sick at home or at a medical facility, those elderly confined to home or a nursing home, and those who care for these people and who are unable conveniently to observe the fast (*Immensae Caritatis*, 1973).

Just as a reminder, during Lent we are called to abstain from meat on Fridays as a reminder that our Lord offered His body a flesh sacrifice for our sins. We also abstain from meat and fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Here the fast entails having only one full meal a day which is sufficient to maintain one's strength. Two other meatless meals are allowed, but are to be light and penitential. Everyone 14 years of age and older is bound to the law of abstinence, and everyone 18 years of age but not yet 60 is bound to the law of fasting. Of course, one must be mindful of his own physical condition. These physical sacrifices help each of us to be spiritually mindful that Our Lord suffered and died for our sins.

Moreover, we should recall that every Friday of the year outside Lent remains a day of penance. While each individual may substitute the traditional abstinence from meat for another practice of self-denial or personal penance, each person should strive to do some penance to atone for sin. (Cf *Code of Canon Law*, No. 1251).

The most important point regarding this question concerns why we ought to fast. St. Paul reminds us: “Continually we carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus, so that in our bodies the life of Jesus may also be revealed” (2 Cor 4:10). We too are charged to convert our whole lives body and soul to the Lord. This conversion process involves doing penance including bodily mortification like fasting for our sins and weaknesses, which in turn strengthens and heals us. Pope Paul VI exhorted the faithful in his apostolic constitution *Paenitini* (1966), “Mortification aims at the liberation of man, who often finds himself, because of concupiscence, almost chained by his own senses. Through corporal fasting

man regains strength, and the wound inflicted on the dignity of our nature by intemperance is cured by the medicine of a salutary abstinence.”

Moreover, the fast before holy Communion creates a physical hunger and thirst for the Lord, which in turn augments the spiritual hunger and thirst we ought to have. In the Old Testament, fasting prepared individuals to receive the action of God and to be placed in His presence. For instance, Moses (Ex 34:28) fasted 40 days atop Mount Sinai as he received the Ten Commandments, and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8) fasted 40 days as he walked to Mount Horeb to encounter God. Similarly, Jesus Himself fasted 40 days as He prepared to begin His public ministry (Mt 4:1ff) and encouraged fasting (Mt 6:16-18). Likewise, this corporal work enhances the spiritual disposition we need to receive Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. In a sense, we fast so as not “to spoil our appetite” but to increase it for the sharing of the Paschal Banquet. Jesus said in the Beatitudes, “Blest are they who hunger and thirst for holiness; they shall have their fill” (Mt 5:6). In all, fasting is an exercise of humility, hope and love essential virtues in preparing ourselves to receive the Holy Eucharist.

Pope John Paul II lamented in *Dominicae Cena* (1980) the problem of some people not being properly disposed to receive holy Communion, even to the point of being in a state of serious mortal sin. He said: “In fact, what one finds most often is not so much a feeling of unworthiness as a certain lack of interior willingness, if one may use this expression, a lack of Eucharistic hunger and thirst, which is also a sign of lack of adequate sensitivity towards the great sacrament of love and a lack of understanding of its nature.” We must make a good faith effort to prepare ourselves properly to receive the Lord.

Therefore, the Eucharistic fast assists us in preparing to receive holy Communion wholly body and soul. This physical mortification plus those special regulations during Lent strengthen our spiritual focus on the Lord, so that we may humbly encounter the divine Savior who offers Himself to us.

Catholic Education Resource Center: Saunders, Rev. William. “The Rules of Fasting.” *Arlington Catholic Herald*.
<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-rules-of-fasting.html>.