

SPIRITUAL BOOK NEWS

Volume 55, No. 1 / February 2010
www.spiritualbookassoc.org



A PUBLICATION OF
SPIRITUAL BOOK ASSOCIATES

FEATURED SELECTION

February 2010

THE SPIRITUALITY OF FASTING

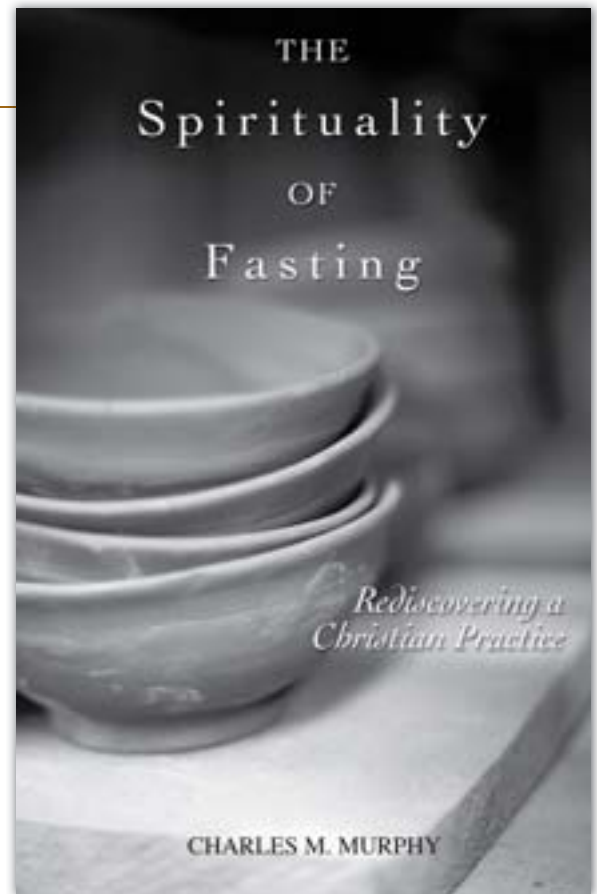
Rediscovering a Christian Practice

Charles M. Murphy

For his 2009 Lenten message, Pope Benedict XVI chose “the value and meaning of fasting” as the theme, observing that “this practice needs to be rediscovered and encouraged again in our day.” In timely response, *The Spirituality of Fasting* draws on sources ancient and current—from Augustine to Michael Pollan—to consider anew how fasting informs the relationships between creator/creature, body/soul, and rich/poor.

Murphy’s extensive theological background, pastoral experience, and personal devotion to his topic come through, inspiring readers to explore what it means to be fully engaged in worship through fasting.

ISBN: 9781594712432 / 128 pages / \$12.95



A PREVIEW OF THE MARCH SELECTION

COME HOME

A Prayer Journey to the Center Within

Marie Schwan, C.S.J.

In *Come Home*, trusted spiritual director Marie Schwan blends insights from centering prayer with Ignatian and twelve-step spirituality, gently guiding readers to discover and embrace the wonder of God’s presence within them.

ISBN: 9781594712296 / 128 pages / \$12.95



HUNGRY FOR MORE IN YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE?

As our information-drenched, appearance-driven culture lunges onward, many are seeking something more from life—an intangible sense of meaning and purpose that material wealth and physical beauty do not provide. Many experience emptiness, or lacking, in life.

The answer lies not in simply filling the hole, but in entering the void. Indeed, the satisfaction of our spiritual hungers can be found in part through the ancient practice of fasting. In *The Spirituality of Fasting: Rediscovering a Christian Practice*, Charles M. Murphy offers a theological reflection on fasting that is at once centuries old and as fresh as this week's tabloids.

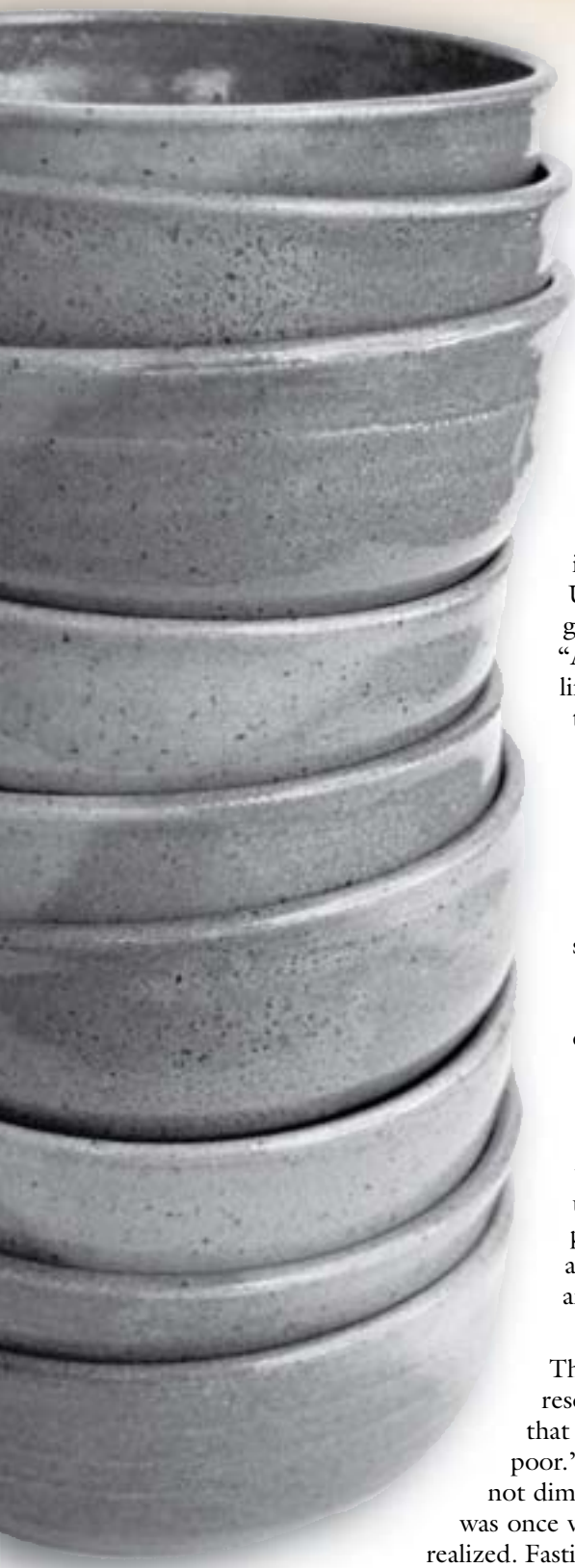
Citing Church teaching and modern psychology, Murphy exhibits a deep understanding of the human condition, yet he aspires to the “transformation of our total being—mind, body, and spirit” to which religious fasting provides a powerful means. Beyond fasting for diet or medical reasons, religious fasting is “an act of humility before God.... Its aim is nothing less than helping us to become more loving persons, loving God above all and our neighbor as ourselves.”

In our culture, Murphy finds compelling evidence that fasting is just what is needed to bring the union of body and soul that God intends for us. For example, in the book Murphy shares the story of country music star Keith Urban. In 2006, Urban entered a rehabilitation program and voluntarily continued treatment far longer than the usual time period. The discipline of rehab restored balance to his life. “As Urban put it, ‘Abstinence was one thing, but there was all this other area of my life to start learning about.’ He concluded with this observation: ‘Abstinence is the ticket into the movie, it is not the movie.’”

Urban's experience is not new. These modern-day rehab programs might be likened to the ascetics who lived the Christian life in the Egyptian desert in the fourth and fifth centuries and experienced the graces available through the fasting regimen. They have, Murphy writes, “given us great wisdom about the necessity of fast and abstinence in our lives. They became convinced that the condition of the body reflects the condition of the soul. An undisciplined body reveals an undisciplined soul. Body and soul have a reciprocal influence upon each other because they are dimensions of each person's identity.” Thus, Murphy does not perceive a dichotomous relationship between body and soul, but rather a mutually interdependent one where both contribute to the full realization of one's identity.

This body *and* soul approach to fasting puts to rest outdated notions of fasting as a means of self-punishment. Throughout the Old and New Testament we find Jesus and the prophets calling believers to fast, not as a punitive act, but as one that will distance us from the distractions of our lives and therefore open us to a deeper union with God. Nor is fasting intended to be a solemn and grim endeavor. “A penitential season can be joyful and bright because it is done communally,” Murphy assures us. “Grim determination and feats of willpower will get you only so far and are often self-defeating. In the end we come to realize it is only God who saves.”

The communal dimension of fasting is also expressed through works of charity. Through charitable acts, we do without; or we contribute our time, energies, and resources. This surrendering of self strengthens our ability to “resist the social forces that drive us to consume more and more of the earth's resources at the expense of the poor.” Through the personal discipline and social charity of fasting, the human person is not diminished. Rather, the fundamental goodness of the human person is affirmed. What was once viewed as “giving up” is rather a means by which our life with God is fulfilled and realized. Fasting is, to borrow Keith Urban's word, the “ticket.”



READER'S GROUP GUIDE

For the religious faster, the “movie” to which the ticket gives us access is life in God. Human nature—body, mind and spirit—has sprung from God’s creative hand. Fasting provides us the personal and communal opportunity to draw nearer to God and eliminate all that impedes our surrender to his will. What God holds in store for us is not a radical departure from our life, but a deeper living of it. Fasting brings us to true joy, knowing we embody God’s vision for creation while diligently working to remove all obstacles to it.

The Spirituality of Fasting is particularly engaging to contemporary readers who are searching for something more. Murphy melds spiritual teachings with practical examples and suggestions to create a compelling and accessible case for fasting. We live in a time of instant gratification, and have come to view

longing as a negative state that must be remedied quickly. To do without is perceived as weakness. Fasting invites us to embrace the power of emptiness—not our own power, but God’s power, moving in and through the void to bring his beloved creatures, made in God’s own image and likeness, into greater fullness of life. Having experienced this great paradox of faith, Paul assured his beloved in Corinth: “I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10 [NAB]). We are likewise reassured. During this Lenten season, *The Spirituality of Fasting* is a prophetic invitation to experience God’s rich compassion and generosity in the midst of the empty promises of our times.

FOR GROUP ENRICHMENT

The Spirituality of Fasting: Rediscovering a Christian Practice is an excellent resource for Lenten group study. The book provides a wonderful balance of Catholic teaching and prayer, research and reflection to support your Lenten observance. Weekly meetings are recommended, with a single chapter as the focus of each meeting. There are six chapters in all, which corresponds to the duration of Lent. As you begin this study, invite all participants to identify how they will fast during the Lenten season, and to jot down their thoughts and reflections on the experience.

Each chapter ends with a series of questions for further reflection, many of which are ideal for group conversation. At the beginning of each meeting, read a selection from the scriptures cited in the corresponding chapter. Following the scripture reading and silent reflection, invite any members who would like to share their fasting reflections to do so. Then, discuss the questions at the end of the chapter, focusing on one

or two that particularly speak to the group. Following your discussion, end the meeting with prayers of gratitude and intercession from group participants.

Here are a few discussion questions provided in *The Spirituality of Fasting*:

1. How can I make sure that my religious beliefs are more than an intellectual exercise but are reflected and actualized in the way I live every day?
2. Jesus specifically forbids grimness when we fast. He wants us to appear light-hearted even as we deny ourselves. When I deny myself something, what is my attitude?
3. Most of us have some experience of being part of a group, such as a team, in which everyone has acted together. Is my experience of the pillars of Christianity—prayer, fasting, and charity—similar to this, or different?

AN ACTIVITY FOR PERSONAL ENRICHMENT

The Spirituality of Fasting provides helpful insights into the practice of fasting, as well as suggestions and resources for establishing the practice in your own life. How do these insights and suggestions challenge or change your understanding of the practice? As you enter your fasting regimen, what do you think will be your greatest challenges? Your greatest blessings? This Lent, keep a journal of your experiences and insights. Recall the promise found in the words of Pope Benedict XVI in his 2009 Ash Wednesday message:

At the beginning of Lent, which constitutes an itinerary of more intense spiritual training, the Liturgy sets before us again three penitential practices that are very dear to the biblical and Christian tradition—prayer, almsgiving, fasting—to prepare us to better celebrate Easter and thus experience God’s power that, as we shall hear in the Paschal Vigil, “dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners

joy, casts out hatred, brings us peace and humbles earthly pride” (Paschal Præconium).

As you study *The Spirituality of Fasting*, continue to use your journal to reflect on the questions provided at the end of each chapter. Here are a few:

1. Our culture often encourages us to minimize our vulnerability and dependence in favor of appearing confident. Do I feel able to express and accept my own vulnerability?
2. How do our chosen lifestyle and consumer choices manifest our ethics?
3. During the Lenten season how do you imagine yourself intensifying the practice of the three pillars?
4. We all experience actual physical hunger at times, such as when we wake up in the morning. How can I connect this physical feeling with my hunger for God, who alone can satisfy our deepest desires?



WEBSITES OF INTEREST



SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AND DISCIPLINES

www.spirithome.com/spirdisc.html

An ecumenical Christian resource with information and inspiration on spiritual practices and disciplines, including fasting.



USCCB PRAYERS FOR FASTING AND ABSTINENCE

www.usccb.org/nab/fasting.htm

A listing of prayers for fasting and abstinence from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.



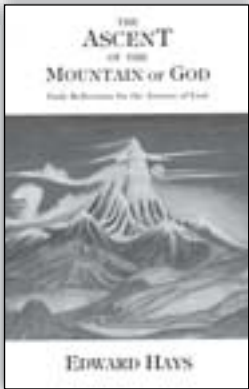
FOOD FOR THE POOR

www.foodforthe poor.org

Food for the Poor is an advocacy group that encourages members to fast communally to raise awareness of the plight of the poor and homeless around the world.

PERFECT BOOKS FOR LENT

FROM FR. EDWARD HAYS



CYCLE C

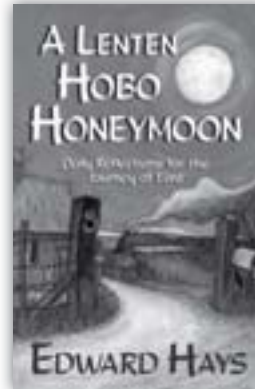
THE ASCENT OF THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD

Daily Reflections for the Journey of Lent

Edward Hays

This rich collection of parables and stories, prayers and paradoxes, turns the challenge of the Lenten ascent into an encouraging adventure.

ISBN: 9780939516261 / 133 pages / \$12.95



CYCLE C

A LENTEN HOBO HONEYMOON

Daily Reflections for the Journey of Lent

Edward Hays

Lent calls each of us to be hobos: *homeward bound* pilgrims who cannot rest until we rest in God. These daily reflections pave a joy-filled journey homeward to God.

ISBN: 9780939516438 / 144 pages / \$12.95



NEW!

OPEN OUR HEARTS

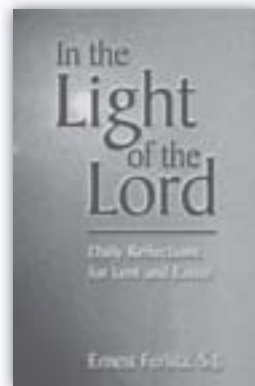
A Small-Group Guide for an Active Lent, Cycle C

Donna L. Ciangio, O.P.

Thomas B. Iwanowski

Lectionary-based and action-oriented, this dynamic six-week Lenten program links Catholics more deeply to the traditions of the Church and to their fellow parishioners.

ISBN: 9781594712425 / 96 pages / \$5.95



ON SALE!

IN THE LIGHT OF THE LORD

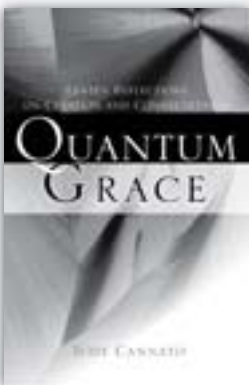
Weekday Reflections for Lent and Easter

Ernest Ferlita, S.J.

Geared for the most important seasons of the Church's liturgical year, these meditations are offered to anyone hoping for a deeper faith and understanding.

ISBN: 9780883474976 / 208 pages / ~~\$12.00~~ **\$3.00**

2 FOR \$10.00!



QUANTUM GRACE

Lenten Reflections on Creation and Connectedness

Judy Cannato

This resource invites us to look at our actions, beliefs, and decisions and reflect upon how they affect the lives of others and ourselves. Use this during Lent for daily individual reflections as well as in a group setting.

ISBN: 9780877939849 / 160 pages / \$9.95



QUANTUM GRACE

The Sunday Readings

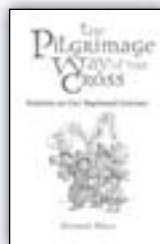
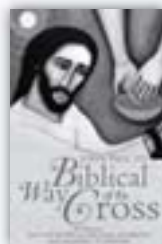
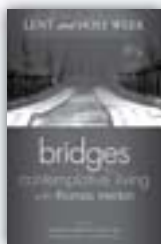
Judy Cannato

Expanding on the author's theme of observing Lent through the lens of "new physics," this resource challenges us to look at the scripture through a slightly different lens—one that reconciles our Christian traditions with modern scientific discoveries.

ISBN: 9781594710247 / 128 pages / \$9.95

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