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Guest Voices



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When Lent arrives each year, I find myself in conversations about fasting with other Catholic women. We exchange plans for our seasonal food abstinence — small meals and no meat on Fridays, often accompanied by a fast from sweets, or alcohol, or snacking between meals.

Then, inevitably, someone voices what many of us have privately considered: "Hopefully this will help me lose another few pounds."

Such admissions are often accompanied by some self-deprecating acknowledgement that weight loss is not supposed to be the goal of our seasonal penance. Nevertheless, sympathetic nods and similar confessions arise in response. Year after year, these conversations evince a tension between our perceptions of what fasting ought to be and our experience of it as Catholic women in the contemporary United States.

These conversations inspired my search for resources aimed at helping Catholic women fast in a setting where we face relentless pressures to conform to society's young, white, able-bodied, effortless, slender ideal.

What I found, however, are commentaries on fasting that oversimplify women's experiences and set up requirements for fasting that are unattainable for many, if not most. No wonder we experience this tension.

In response this year, I urge Catholics to share more realistic portraits of women's experiences and a more inclusive description of this Lenten practice.

Popular Catholic writers teach that a singular focus on God motivates fasting, while more superficial, worldly aspirations drive dieting. Emphasizing these contrasting motives, commentators position fasting and dieting as mutually exclusive: One must dispense with body hatred in order to fast.

We see this in Matthew Kelly's bestselling *Rediscover Catholicism*, where he emphasizes "how different the reasons for fasting are from the reasons for dieting." He explains, "We do not fast to impress other people. We fast to cultivate the inner life," whereas dieting "is devoid of the strongest motives and reasons."

Charles Murphy draws a similar distinction in *The Spirituality of Fasting*, where he describes fasting as "focused on God and not ourselves" while "sharply delineating it from dieting and medically supervised fasts" that focus "only on the body." For many, Murphy bemoans, "dieting has replaced fasting."

A problem with these messages is that they often instruct Catholics to eschew social pressures as if this were easy. Yet, if the experience of my friends and me is any indication, separating one's desire for greater communion with God from one's engrained wish to conform to society's body ideals is more complicated than these commentaries suggest.

Women are not helpless victims of society's messages, but decades of research on women's body image attest to the fact that we are profoundly shaped by the culture. A Glamour magazine study found that 97% of women reported to having negative thoughts about their bodies each day. On average, they had 13 of these thoughts daily.

Mary DeTurris Poust's treatment of fasting in *Cravings* is exceptional for its attention women's struggles against society's pervasive body demands. However, when she advises that "fasting requires an underpinning of prayer to prevent it from morphing into a diet designed to make us more appealing by worldly standards," she communicates the troubling message that the motives of fasting and dieting are mutually exclusive.

This calls into question whether women who struggle with habitual disdain for their bodies can fast at all. If we accept that these motives are mutually exclusive, then every Catholic woman who longs to meet society's beauty demands through food abstinence is disqualified from fasting — at least until divine intervention untethers her from society's body demands, as DeTurris Poust suggests.

There are, of course, circumstances in which individuals should be disqualified from fasting. The U.S. bishops advise that individuals with poor health should not take up this discipline, an exemption that presumably applies to those with dangerous eating disorders.

But most Catholic women who struggle with society's body demands are not in this situation. The message that fasting requires pure motives disqualifies the scores of healthy Catholic women who negotiate these social pressures every day.

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This Lent is an opportunity for Catholics to share a different message about fasting, one that reflects realistic accounts of women's experiences and a more inclusive portrait of the practice.

To start, talk about fasting should be grounded in a clear-eyed account of Catholic women's lived experiences. In a society where women are immersed in messages that exhort them to conform to an unrealistic standard of beauty, desires to attain it are unfortunately commonplace. It is time we listen to women and acknowledge that these desires frequently coexist with a Catholic's desire to deepen communion with God through fasting.

Admitting this, Catholics need not conclude that fasting for God and dieting for beauty are one in the same. Catholic writers are right that distinct motives define fasting and dieting, but they are misguided to insist that these motives are mutually exclusive. We can communicate that fasting is a discipline distinctly motivated by the church's collective striving toward deeper communion with God while also affirming that Catholics need not be free of all other motivations in order to participate. God's grace can work in us, even when we come as we are.

Yet Catholics should not acquiesce to oppressive beauty standards. Lent is an opportunity for us to start conversations about society's body demands. The sexist, racist, ableist and consumeristic realities of society's unrealistic ideal require extended analysis and the response of collective action. Yet few Catholic communities organize to address them. Why not start now?

To counteract harmful beauty demands, Lisa Isherwood suggests in her book *The Fat Jesus* that Christian communities follow Jesus's example by engaging in "celebratory eating." Perhaps Catholic communities could enhance Lenten fish fries with education about society's detrimental body ideal and with a celebration of appetites — the very appetites that Catholic women are told to suppress for the sake of becoming something they are not.

Local communities should also reflect on Christianity's complicity in perpetuating the body standards that permeate society. For instance, we should note the images in our local parish bulletins, websites and even worship spaces. Do they feature

individuals who embody society's prevailing beauty ideal in shape, size, class and color? We should diversify these images to celebrate all bodies, especially those typically underappreciated.

Catholics can also host seasonal book clubs exploring one of a number of excellent books on Christianity and body image, such as Isherwood's *The Fat Jesus* or Michelle Mary Lelwica's *Shameful Bodies*. Such gatherings might occasion insightful reflection on the social dynamics of body hatred, personal experiences of fasting, and ideally, some lasting social action.

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