

Fasting and Feasting: Longing and Fulfillment
John Carroll Talk – Feb. 12, 2018
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I'm honored to have been invited to speak to you this evening. The generosity, enthusiasm, and faithfulness of members of the John Carroll Society is an asset to the Archdiocese of Washington. Your service to our local Church and Archbishop is a great witness to your faith and dedication to the Lord. I'm indebted to Msgr. Vaghi, your chaplain, who is not only a great pastor to work with, but is also a great mentor and a friend.

We're in the midst of what is called in Latin cultures "Carnivale," which loosely means to "get rid of the meat." We're in a short time of year dedicated to the fact that we want to get all our feasting in – and get ready for the fast. Pancakes, king cakes, beignets, and spirits (and chicken piccata) – get it all in, because Lent is coming. So, it's fitting that we're gathered here – so well-fed and nourished. The title of this talk is "Fasting and Feasting: Longing and Fulfillment." As we currently feast – and prepare to fast – I'd like to speak on the importance of celebrating and entering feasts as a way to enter into the life of the Church and encounter Christ.

I'd like to share with you my first memory of Lent – and it's not a good one. I was five, and my parents decided to do a horrible thing. I don't know how they could've been so cruel. They did it under the guise of piety – but it was a terrible experience of imposed mortification. My parents decided, during that fateful Lent of 1988, that the whole family would give up TV. No television. Forty days and forty nights with no television. I was thrust out of the realm of educational television and Saturday morning cartoons so beautifully prepared for me by the networks and the people of TV Guide. In the midst of this drought of heartache and suffering, turning to my mother and asking, "Is Sesame Street still on the air?"

But that Lent, we did other things. Things like read, play games, spend time as a family – go outside. Whatever world is trapping us – it might be work, recreation, anxiety – Lent is a time to be lifted out of that world and make room for God. For the professional, we have to be lifted out of secular, efficient, economic time for just a moment – to make time for God.

In the 19th century, Kierkegaard tried to understand what was different from the experience of Christendom from our own day – and why Christianity seemed to be on the wane and secularism on the rise. What has changed? Is it science or politics or something else? Kierkegaard came to the conclusion that the change that had the biggest effect was on how the world approached time. Time was no longer God’s time, but time was primarily devoted to economic endeavors. Kierkegaard wrote:

The pivotal concept in Christianity, that which made all things new, is the fullness of time, but the fullness of time is the moment as the eternal, and yet this eternal is also the future and past. If attention is not paid to this, not a single concept can be saved from a heretical and treasonable admixture that annihilates the concept.¹

When time ceases to be seasons and moments set aside for God – and becomes simply minutes set aside for efficiency, the reality of eternity can’t penetrate. We are part of this world – we have to make an extra effort to step away for a moment, from what’s really important.

The sights and sounds of Lent: Purple vestments, Stations of the Cross, the *Stabat Mater*, and cardboard rice boxes, tuna casserole on Friday nights – It’s a very Catholic time of year. Ash Wednesday gets the ball rolling – it’s the one day a year when everyone knows you’re a Catholic.

A few years back, I had a memorable group of parishioners who were students at University of Maryland. They were great supporters of Mark Turgeon, the basketball coach at

¹ Wyllie, R. “Kierkegaard’s Critique of Secular Time.” <http://www.telospress.com/kierkegaards-critique-of-secular-time/>, 2014

Maryland. You might not know this, but there was a time when Maryland fans weren't known for their good behavior. There was that one game when they cursed out children and threw objects at the families of the opposing team. These students – about five of them - became the “Turgeon-ites.” They put on suits like Turgeon, the coach, and did whatever motions Turgeon did. Their trademark was a white patch in their cowlick like Turgeon has. They became a big deal – and ESPN wanted to cover them. The day they were covered happened to be Ash Wednesday. And I was so proud – here were these kids, being interviewed on ESPN...each of them with ashes on their foreheads. That was the kind of moment that makes a priest proud.

I hope at some point, each one of you has the opportunity to visit a monastery. To have a couple of days or more to see – there is another way of approaching time. The monk wakes up to the morning bell – and begins with communal prayer to God. The variation in his life isn't from technology or entertainments – the variation comes in the liturgical seasons and feasts. His work is not separate from his prayer. Both work and prayer are consecrated to God. And it's all the more powerful, because it's lived out in community.

We are far from monastic bells. We're ruled by alarm clocks, texts, and time sheets. Creating feasts and fasts isn't easy for us – because in our day, society demands that our time be structured for maximum efficiency and getting things done. This is a change for modern men and women.

I was recently speaking to a dad about the possibility of parents coming together to fight against Sunday sports games and practices for kids. He's a good dad, a pious dad – so I expected him to agree with me. I was saying, “Our churches need this. Our families need this. We need space for God – space that isn't scheduled.” The dad – a good, pious man - looked at me, with something of a blank expression. He asked, “But what would we do to fill the time?”

In the year 2000, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote an amusing, nuanced commentary on the current upper-class of the United States. His book is called *Bobos in Paradise*.² His thesis is that a new elite has been formed, and it is defined by being a strange fusion of bourgeoisie and bohemian values. (Hence, the name *bobo*.) They're bourgeoisie in the sense that they don't mind having high-powered careers and making good money. Career and income are important to them. They're bohemian, in that they have adopted unto themselves the tastes and values of the artists, freethinkers, and adventurers. It's important to know - He lives in DC – The book is a great read because he pokes fun at a world we know very well. These are my friends, my neighbors, my parishioners, and (in many ways) even myself.

What is the bobo? In one chapter, Brooks explains that although most classes throughout history have been defined by what they produce, this group is largely defined by what they consume. The bobo is found sipping a latte in a coffee shop, wearing REI boots to go shopping at the organic market, driving large sport utility vehicles up and down Massachusetts Avenue. There are rules to being a bobo. They tend to have very large kitchens. Another rule, he writes: "Spending 15,000 on a media center is vulgar, but spending 15,000 on a slate shower stall is a sign that you are at one with the Zen-like rhythms of nature." Food is important – I just ate at a wonderful restaurant called "True Food." They realize what people are looking for – they're tired of eating trash. For the Bobo, there's a longing for what's spiritual and real. In this, we have a great opportunity. In the Bobo, there is a genuine longing for authenticity – which I think might be satisfied if they were members of our Catholic Church.

² Brooks, D. *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000

Christopher Dawson³, the great Catholic historian and chair of Catholic studies at Harvard from 1958-62, lays out a thesis for the spread of Christian faith. How is the faith spread? Culture. The faith is transmitted through culture. We're a people, a community, a communion – the Body of Christ in the world. As such, we're not primarily a set of propositions. We're an encounter with a person – a person we meet in the liturgy, in the Scriptures, in the community, and in the daily living out of our faith.

From the first moment of creation – we have a God who creates physical things: air, water, earth, sea creatures, plants, man and woman – and he says, “It is good.” God blesses his people with the Sabbath: a day to worship, rest from work, and to feast. God leads his people to the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. The prophets encourage acts of penance – putting on sackcloth and ashes – as a way of winning God's favor. Each victory of God on the battlefield or over the wicked is celebrated with a feast. God calls his people in Revelation to the eternal banquet of the Lamb. We enter that same feast – that heavenly banquet – at each and every experience of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Feasts – what you eat. Fasts – what you don't eat. Why is this so powerful? It all comes down to the Incarnation. God became man, the Word took on flesh. Because of the incarnation, there's a physicality to our prayer – stand, kneel, sit. There's a physicality to our churches – statues, stained-glass, holy water. There's a physicality even to our sacraments – water, bread, wine, oil, a man and woman. We celebrate the important events of the Life of Jesus in tangible, physical ways. (Christmas trees, Easter eggs, egg nog, fasting, nativity displays, crucifixes.) Jesus is the Incarnation – God entering time and space. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

³ Dawson, C. *The Crisis of Western Education*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961

In the 13th century, the heresy of Albigensianism arose in the Church. The Albigensians seemed holy – certainly holier than the diocesan clergy, which wasn't that difficult. But the Albigensians had some problematic ideas. The Albigensians believed that matter (the physical) was evil and the spiritual was good. There was an evil god who produced matter and the good god produced the spirit. As such, our bodies were bad. Your soul was trapped in a body. So – that led them to discourage people from having children – don't bring more matter into the world. In fact, according to them, the best thing you could do would be to kill yourself – and free your soul.

The Order of Preachers, the Dominicans, were founded to challenge the Albigensian heresy. They reaffirmed the goodness of the body. Fasting wasn't about starving yourself to death – but about allowing the body, which is good, to assist you in offering yourself to God. Feasting wasn't sinful – but was an expression of rejoicing at God's goodness. Not only did a good God make the created world – spirit and matter – his Son took on human flesh in the Incarnation. He did that so that he could take our sins upon himself and atone for them. He did this so that he could give us his Body and Blood. He did this so that he could establish a people – his Church – the Body of Christ.

My first year out of college I was an account manager at a small start-up in McLean. The company was a small start-up. We were having a company lunch out to eat at P.F. Chang's. The problem? It was Ash Wednesday. So – here it is – Ash Wednesday, and I'm with my co-workers at P.F. Chang's. I searched the menu, nervously trying to see what options I had so I wouldn't break the food requirements for Ash Wednesday. It was a great moment when I realized my boss was doing the same thing – perusing the menu, trying to find a meatless option. This great realization, by both of us – that together, with the whole Church, we were entering into the great

fast of Lent, entering into the desert with Jesus Christ, preparing for the great feast of Easter.

And all that just because we ordered garlic shrimp instead of beef with broccoli!

The medieval world operated with a different sense of time – and through the awareness that the divine had entered the temporal, they recognized God in small things. They weren't as efficient or productive as we are, but they had a deeper sense of the seriousness of feasting and fasting. To have a sense of what a feast feels like, it's great to enter into literature.

I'd like to share a passage from *Kristin Lavranstatter*. This is early medieval Norway, and they're getting ready for a feast:

[Kristin's] mother glanced at the scuffling pigs and said, "We won't be able to get by with fewer than eighteen reindeer." "Do you think we'll need so many?" asked her daughter. "Yes, we must serve game with the pork each day," replied her mother. "And we'll only have enough fowl and hare to serve the guests in the high loft. You must remember that close to two hundred people will be coming here, with their servants and children and the poor must be fed as well. ...some of the guests will no doubt stay on for the rest of the week – at least. Stay here and tend to the ale, Kristin. I have to go and cook dinner for your father and the haymakers."⁴

A feast was quite an occasion – and it would usually end with all the men falling asleep drunk, and all the women looking at them with loving derision.

The Word became Flesh, and dwelt among us. At heart, the physicality of how we live our faith stems from our conviction that God himself took on physicality. Time and again, saints and theologians have had to remind the Church – and convince the Church of the goodness of the body, a body which will rise on the last day.

Some young Catholics have recently written some interesting books with these things in mind. There's the book *The Bad Catholics Guide to Good Living or Drinking with the Saints*. A

⁴ Undset, S. *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Penguin Books (2005), p. 256

lot of clever ideas. A friend of mine, a young priest bakes for his staff to celebrate random feast days. You never people so excited about the Feast of Simon and Jude or Eusebius of Vercelli.

Joseph Pieper⁵ is a great Catholic philosopher of the 20th century. He wrote some wonderful, short books that really clarify many of the things we need clarified today. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, *In Tune with The World: A theory of Festivity*. Both books address one of the foundations of culture – real feasting. A feast cannot spring from a government mandate. It has to spring from the heart of the people – and it’s a way to connect with something grander. A genuine feast is not forced. There’s a spontaneous celebration of something. Religious feasting – which is part of every culture – is a celebration of the activity of the supernatural in our world. The celebrating erupts in music, feasting, decorations, parties, and it becomes the object of stories. That’s what Christmas is. It has a look, a taste – it takes over our society. Thanksgiving does the same. Lent and Easter do the same for our Church. Pieper writes (41) “Suddenly the here and now are burst asunder and the everyday realm of existence is thrown open to eternity.”⁶

Lent is a graced time to once again open space for God. The idea of the fast – I will do with less. I will even allow hunger to open my heart to God. The idea of prayer: I will take time to silence all the noise, to listen for God. Almsgiving: I see the poor, and I share with those in need.

I encourage you to make some resolutions about how to make this Lent a good one:

- Perhaps acts of service
- Participating in Stations of the Cross
- Given up a bad habit
- Stepping away from the internet, radio, TV, cell phone
- Reading a spiritual book

⁵ Pieper, J. *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1963

⁶ *Ibid.* 41

Ash Wednesday is one of the busiest days in the Catholic Church. People love to get their ashes! I don't know why. Chesterton once said, "Chesterton also said original sin—the idea that everyone is born a sinner and will manifest that sinfulness—is the only Christian doctrine that can be empirically verified." People know the truth of their sinfulness perhaps – and are happy to have a smudge of dirt on their foreheads that recognizes it. Daily Masses are packed with Lent.

But this is the strange thing: People come for the fast – but they forget the feast! Participate in the Triduum! Participate in Good Friday, Holy Thursday, and Easter. Then when Easter comes – which by the way is eight days – celebrate! Eat, drink, and celebrate the resurrection of the Lord!

In his work, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor writes about the same concept and the importance of feasts for enlivening the Christian imagination: He writes,

The Easter Vigil, for instance brings us back in the vicinity of the original Easter, closer than last year's summer day... The original Passover, in Egypt, and the last supper, are brought into close proximity by typology, although they are aeons apart. And so on.⁷

The most frequent way we experience this, of course, is setting aside Sunday. In his encyclical *Dies Domini*, John Paul II writes:

It is right, therefore, to claim, in the words of a fourth century homily, that "the Lord's Day" is "the lord of days".(2) Those who have received the grace of faith in the Risen Lord cannot fail to grasp the significance of this day of the week with the same deep emotion which led Saint Jerome to say: "Sunday is the day of the Resurrection, it is the day of Christians, it is our day".(3) For Christians, Sunday is "the fundamental feastday", (4) established not only to mark the succession of time but to reveal time's deeper meaning.⁸

⁷ Wyllie, R. *Kierkegaard's Critique of Time*

⁸ *Dies Domini*, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini.html

The John Carroll Society. We gather as a group who seek to live our faith in an intentional way, in the midst of the world that has largely forgotten. By embracing Catholic culture – by partaking and sharing in Catholic culture and feasts – you are spreading Jesus Christ. One of the greatest challenges of our age is to re-create space for God to penetrate. We're physical beings, so creating space – making something different for God to enter into in – is physical.

Awhile back, I was at a funeral at my home parish. It was a particularly sad funeral – a particularly tragic loss. As I sat, concelebrating the Mass at my home parish – a thought and prayer struck me. I had worshiped in that church for so many years. My faith had been nourished in that church. My family sat in that pew. That crucifix, that tabernacle, that altar, those people - encountering divinity together, side by side, week after week. The human element of our parish life is so apparent. We come to see one another's quirks. We enter into the Mass with distractions, wandering minds, and the ever-present family elbow jab. But, think and pray about this – in that building, with these people, week after week, we encounter the divine. Our regular encounter with divinity, at our parishes, gives our humanity the strength to endure the Cross. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we ascend to that altar, we encounter the glory of the Son's body and blood, we hear the Father's voice: That is the ultimate feast – the nourishment at the altar.

Much of what Msgr. Vaghi and I do at Little Flower, along with the sisters and lay faithful, is working to create and maintain a uniquely Catholic culture for our parishioners – an experience that envelops their lives, that is, truly, Catholic. The Irish have a phrase about where you encounter the spiritual. They say the “thin spaces.” Spaces where heaven and earth are thin – where God and angelic beings seem to be breaking through. I was given this advice by a monk,

shortly before I traveled to Ireland. He said, “Make everything about it part of your pilgrimage. The music, the weather, the people, the pubs...everything.”

God enters our world – yours and mine – and shapes it and us. He does it through the seasons of the Churches year, the fasts and the feasts. We experience him entering our world in the Mass, when God lifts the veil of heaven and earth and is present at the altar.

Hilaire Belloc certainly understood the importance of feasting for our Catholic faith, as reflected in this memorable quote of his:

Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine,
There’s always laughter and good red wine.
At least I’ve always found it so.
Benedicamus Domino!

Through your hard work and God’s good favor, I think the same might be said of the John Carroll Society.