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Fasting for Climate Justice – A Lutheran Perspective

What is the initiative and where does it come from?

Climate change is an advocacy priority for The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), as described in the LWF Strategy 2012-2017. Sustainability also was named by the 2010 LWF Youth Pre-Assembly as the top priority for the Lutheran communion.

As part of this commitment, the LWF was represented by a delegation during the 19th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 19) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change held in Warsaw, Poland, in November 2013.

The delegation, composed of seven young people from all of the seven LWF regions, was very active in promoting a call to fast for climate justice, as a way to express solidarity with the most vulnerable, who are already affected by climate change. This initiative received the support of many different faith representatives, both Christian and non-Christian.

As a result of this cooperation, the religious representatives took a decision to prepare for and develop a monthly Day of Fasting for the Climate campaign, engaging in prayer and spiritual reflection before the next Conference of the Parties (COP 20), to be held in Lima, Peru, in December 2014.

The call to a fast for the climate on the first day of each month is a way for religious communities to express and act upon their concern about climate change and climate justice. It also is a way to give more visibility; publicly express common faith, spiritual and ethical values; and show a commitment to undertake the necessary transformations in their communities, as well as to demand that national governments work for more ambitious and ethical outcomes in climate negotiations.

Therefore, we ask our LWF member churches to share this invitation and to embark on a *Day of Fasting for the Climate* to be active advocates in the context of climate change and climate justice.

Dr Carlos Bock
Director, LWF Department for Mission and Development

What does our faith tradition say about fasting?

Fasting is a long-standing spiritual practice that we find in many religious traditions. Most traditions know regular fasting, such as a longer fast once a year during the religious calendar (e.g. Ramadan in Islam, Lent in Christianity), and monthly or weekly fasting.

There also is special fasting in times of crisis, both individual as well as collective crises. David fasted when his and Bathseba's child was seriously ill (2 Samuel 12:16.21-23) and the people of Nineveh fasted as they heard Jonah's call to repent (Jonah 3:5). Even in the most desperate situations, the prophetic call goes out: "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." (Joel 2:12).

Fasting is both an intensive bodily, i.e. physical, and spiritual experience. Fasting is embedded in and accompanied by prayer. The deep meaning of fasting is to turn our attention towards God, to let our hearts and minds be touched by God's presence, and thereby to let go of wrongdoings and return to God.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus fasted forty days and nights, experiencing temptations of power and might (Matthew 4:2). This shows how fasting helps to discern the Spirit and to trust in the ways that God sets out. The first Christians also practiced a joint fast with prayer as they sought to discern the way for their communities and their leaders (Acts 13:2f.; 14:23).

The Bible portrays fasting as an integral part of religious life. At the same time, it strongly criticizes false understandings of fasting: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day" (Isaiah 58:3).

Fasting has become perverted if it is used just as a spiritual cover, and social responsibility is neglected. The Bible calls us to see the deep connection between the relationship to God and the relationship to one's neighbors:

"Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;

you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am." (Isaiah 58:6-9)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also warns against false motivations for and practices of fasting (Matthew 6:16). Those who just want to be seen fasting are called "hypocrites." In his explanation of this passage, Martin Luther underlines this problem and says that he has never seen any real fasting.

Luther especially opposes any aspirations to gain justification before God through one's own fasting. Indeed, the Bible is very clear that God's mercy is not the result of but the basis for our fasting. We fast not in order to *gain* mercy, but *because of* God's mercy: "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful" (Joel 2:13).

In his treatise on the Sermon on the Mount, Luther strongly questions the intentions behind much of the fasting that is taking place. But he does not abandon fasting; on the contrary, he proposes that there are still two kinds of fasting which are meaningful:

"There are two kinds of fasts that are good and commendable. One could be called a secular or civil fast; it is ordered by the government as any other governmental ordinance or command is, and it is not required as a good work or as a divine service." (*Luther's Works*, vol. 21, p. 159)

The purpose of the civil fast is "to teach people to live a little more moderately," he adds "especially those who are young, sturdy and strong." The civil fast could be not eating or selling meat once or twice a week, or abstaining from a proper evening meal and consuming only a piece of bread and a beverage, "to keep everything from being used up with the kind of incessant guzzling and gobbling."

Luther commends such simple practices of fasting to raise awareness of greedy and thoughtless lifestyles so pervasive in society. It is interesting that Luther insists that this should not just be an individual practice, but a general societal practice:

"In addition to this fast there should also be a general spiritual fast for us Christians to observe. It would be a good arrangement to observe a general fast for a few days before Easter, before Pentecost, and before Christmas, to distribute the fasts over the year. But on no account dare it to be done for the purpose of making it an act of worship or a means of meriting something and reconciling God."

Rather, fasting should raise awareness of and draw attention to these significant times in the liturgical year: "For certain seasons have to be distinguished and set aside as fasts and festivals for the sake of the common herd, to preach and commemorate the principal events and deeds of Christ."

In his account of how fasting should look, Luther calls for a more rigorous fast, which implies not only not eating, but abstaining from any physical pleasure: "You see, what I call the real fasting of Christians means that you punish your whole body and compel it, as well as all five senses, to forsake and do without whatever makes life comfortable." (p. 161).

At the same time, Luther gives space for everyone to find the appropriate way and measure for oneself: "But I will not take it upon myself to prescribe this sort of fasting, nor will I impose it upon anyone else. Here everyone has to take a look at himself and judge his own feelings. We are not all alike, and so no one can set up a general rule." (p. 162).

Therefore, Luther again reminds us of the meaning of fasting and gives this as guiding principle: "For this fasting is directed only against the lust and the passions of the flesh, not against nature itself." Luther describes fasting as an experience that teaches and educates us to live a meaningful life, a life that is not carried away by false desires, but that is in accordance with human measures, sustained and guided by God's grace.

Summarizing these insights from the biblical tradition, we realize that fasting is a concrete practice that brings together the physical, spiritual and social dimensions of human life. The physical practice helps us to focus on God's gracious presence and

reconnects us with God's call to care for the neighbor. Through fasting we become aware of and discover who we are as human beings before God and in relation to our fellow human beings. Fasting helps us to be truly human and to be faithful in these relationships.

Luther's conclusion at the end of his reflection on fasting is straightforward: "Your service to God must be only faith in Christ and love to your neighbor, simply doing what is required of you." (p. 162).

Rev. Dr Simone Sinn

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Why advocate for climate justice?

The LWF Eleventh Assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2010 reinforced the LWF's commitment to advocate for climate justice.

Building on resolutions from previous LWF gatherings, the Assembly committed the LWF to "caring for the environment, which we do not own, so future generations may enjoy the fruits of creation and lead wholesome lives."

The 2010 Assembly expressed its awareness "that the window of opportunity for the reduction of greenhouse gases is shrinking. We realize that those who are most to blame often feel the least affected." It highlighted "the grave impacts on food security that are already being felt in many parts of the world as a result of changing climatic patterns."

The LWF called upon "all governments to show more decisive leadership in responding to climate change and in moving beyond reliance on fossil fuels for energy needs." It called for enhanced efforts "to address the impacts of climate change on development and poverty in the most vulnerable communities."

One of the priority themes for the LWF's global advocacy is climate change and environmental protection, with an emphasis on escalating impacts for already poor and vulnerable people.

The LWF carries out this advocacy in two ways: through the climate adaptation projects of LWF Department for World Service country programs, and through the engagement and mobilization of youth to represent the LWF at United Nations climate change conferences.

Our goal is that future generations may enjoy the fruits of creation and lead wholesome lives.

Ralston Deffenbaugh

LWF Assistant General Secretary for International Affairs and Human Rights

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