

Sermon for Christian Unity 2026 - Monreale 24/1/26

INTRODUCTION

Isaiah 58:6-11 <<Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, 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 to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide your eyes from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall speedily be done. Your righteousness shall go before you, and 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. If you take away from your midst the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you offer your food to the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the fasting, then shall your light rise in the darkness, and your gloom be as the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually; he will satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail.

Dear brothers,

One of the texts proposed for reflection in the Liturgy of this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is Isaiah 58:6-11. These verses are found in the book of Isaiah, which we Christians call the Proto-Gospel. The text is fully in tune with the message that, centuries later, the Lord Jesus would proclaim.

Isn't this the fast I chose? This passage, as Dr. Kay observes, "stands as a homily for the Day of Atonement." For those who follow the Jewish religion, the Day of Atonement corresponds to their New Year, Yom Kippur. We have the custom of celebrating the New Year with feasts and revelry; Jews do so by fasting for 24 hours. A strict fast without water. The practice of fasting is also Christian, although it has fallen into disuse. For them, fasting before the new year has a dual meaning: to free oneself from past sins by confessing them and expressing condolences (hence the fast) and to begin a new year free from all burdens, lightened by guilt, and serene. Interesting!

A religious fast

But the "Joyspoiler," in this case the Lord, says: "This is not the fast I have chosen." What? The contrast is evident in the words from verses four to nine. God is not pleased with externals. The mere mannerisms of religion, or a head bowed like a reed, covered in sackcloth and ashes, are hateful to the Almighty. Even a strict fast can become formal and ritualistic.

FASTING MEANS BEING TRULY RELIGIOUS. It means "loosing the bonds of wickedness," freeing one's soul from the last chains of lust and selfishness, and helping to free the souls of others. Religious effort consists in dealing directly with the character, and not with the face; with the habits of evil, and not with the ritual of ceremonies.

FASTING MEANS BEING DEEPLY HUMAN. It means caring for our brothers and sisters around the world, just as the Venerable Order of Saint Lazarus does throughout the world, and just as you, and all of us, do through the wonderful relief initiatives you carry out privately and share about them in our chat.

GOD'S IDEA OF FASTING IS NOT A BEAUTIFUL EXTERNAL DISPLAY OF HUMILIATION.

GOD'S IDEA OF FASTING IS SELF-CONTROL FOR GREATER EFFICIENCY IN SERVICE. And such fasting must not be visible. A man who fasts in this sense can "anoint his head, wash his face," and appear cheerful. The best signs of fasting are the good works we can perform, for which we gain power through our self-control: loosening bonds, freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, blessing all.

CONCLUSION

What does fasting have to do with the Week of Prayer? Intentions alone are not enough; it takes passion, heart, and action to achieve unity among Christians. In this area too, we need to train men and women willing to seriously commit themselves to the cause of unity, beginning with Christians and extending to all peoples.