

## Catholic 101 Asceticism

Lent is nearly here; the time of the Liturgical Year when we give things up, eat less, celebrate less, and pray more. We do these things, these disciplines to facilitate our transformation into spiritual maturity. Asceticism (self denial) reminds us that penance and sacrifice are part of what it means to be a spiritual person. This type of discipline is common to all religions; it is thousands of years old. In Christianity it can be traced all the way back to the second century to men who moved away from the cities into the desert to live lives of harsh penance and purge themselves of every worldly pleasure as a way of forcing themselves to focus on life beyond this life; to us every waking moment to develop the soul. Of course women too lived lives of harsh austerity, for example Saints Perpetua and Felicity, but women simply were not allowed by second century society to go off to the desert by themselves. Over many centuries we have learned to curb the excesses of asceticism but the appreciation of self-control is an essential part of the spiritual life. Athletes develop their bodies but control and restraint. They give up food and time and push their bodies, sometimes to the point of exhaustion to get to the top of a mountain, or master the parallel bars, or win a marathon. Ascetics do the same things, but for a different reason, to conquer themselves and develop their souls. Someone with even just a basic understanding of asceticism appreciates that to become what we can become spiritually, some things, not just the obvious bad things, but some good things must be given up, not forever but sometimes just for now. Sometimes it's necessary to give up the good for the better. Fasting, for example, helps us discern what is unnecessary and what is essential; feeling hungry while fasting is meant to help focus the search for spiritual growth. The Church requires us to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, to find gifts of the soul that are hard to find in other ways. If we are never hungry it's easy to be blind to those who always are. If we can control our bodies on these fast days, we can learn to control ourselves in more challenging situations. Fasting helps us to say no to ourselves in a world that celebrates excess and self gratification above all else. Giving things up is not about loss because we stand to gain a great deal. In Lent we are obligated to fast only two days if we are between the ages of 18 and 59, and fasting for a day is expressed in only one full meal and then small snacks if needed. Obviously one must spend more than two days to train their body for a marathon. The asceticism of Lent comes to train us to keep our eyes on Jesus Christ, obviously this too will require more than two days.