## MEDIA FASING

SIX WEEKS TO RECHARGE IN CHRIST

> FOREWORD BY JONATHAN ROUMIE

SISTER NANCY USSELMANN, FSP

## **MEDIA FASTING**

## Six Weeks to Recharge in Christ

by Sister Nancy Usselmann, FSP Foreword by Jonathan Roumie



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For all young adults searching for communion with God in a digitally hyper-connected world.



And in gratitude for my editors, Sister Marie Paul Curley, FSP, and Courtney Saponaro, who brought this book to life and believed in the need to integrate our life of faith with our media experience.

## Contents

Foreword
Introduction
How to Use This Book
Part 1
SPIRITUALLY DRAINED
Blessing and Curse
What Is Fasting?
Effects of Media Fasts
Ways of Media Fasting
Making a Media Fast Plan
Getting Started
Part 2
SPIRITUAL RECHARGE
Week 1
Paring Down to the Essentials
Sunday—Between Me and God
Monday—True Greatness
Tuesday—Tuning Out Chaos
Wednesday—Instagramification
Thursday—Facing Burnout

Friday—iGods
Saturday—Digital Detox
Media Fast Check-in
Week 2
Choosing the Good Life
Sunday—Personal Integrity
Monday—Sharing Good News 69
Tuesday—Demythologizing Porn
Wednesday—Online Be-Attitudes
Thursday—The Lasso Effect
Friday—The Reality of Evil
Saturday—Hope in an Anxious World 81
Media Fast Check-in
Week 3
Being Media Mindful
Sunday—Our Music Canon
Monday—Binge-Watching
Tuesday—Is Google the New God? 94
Wednesday—Discerning Ideologies 96
Thursday—Gender Disinformation 99
Friday—The Swiping Game
Saturday—Examination of My Online Life 104
Media Fast Check-in
Week 4
Becoming Cultural Mystics
Sunday—Praying the News
Monday—Praying for Media Creators
Tuesday—Cinema Divina
Wednesday—Celebrity Icons

Thursday—Pop Culture Catechism	121
Friday—Saints as Cultural Mystics	123
Saturday—Mary, the First Influencer	126
Media Fast Check-in	128
Week 5	
Creating Communion	131
Sunday—Echo Chamber Prejudices	135
Monday—Gaming Groups	138
Tuesday—Concert Connection	140
Wednesday—Recognizing Our Humanity	142
Thursday—Gauging Authentic Friendships	144
Friday—FOMO	146
Saturday—Digital Prayer	149
Media Fast Check-in	151
Week 6	
Transforming the Culture	153
Sunday—The Common Good	157
Monday—Sacramental Worldview	160
Tuesday—Consumerism	163
Wednesday—Cancel Culture	165
Thursday—Culture of Life	167
Friday—A Communicative Love	170
Saturday—Spiritual Transformation	173
Media Fast Check-in	175
Conclusion: Moving Forward with My Media	177
Spirituality for a Digital Age	191
Acknowledgments	193
Appendix A: Media Addictions	195
Appendix B: Pornography	201

Appendix C: Prayers	207
Prayer to Be Media Mindful	207
Canticle of Praise for the Media in Today's World	208
Proclaiming Christ through the Media Arts	209
Litany of Media Saints for Media Mindfulness	209
A Prayer to Discern the Cries of Humanity	
in Popular Music	211
Appendix D: Practices	213
Examination of Conscience for My Online Life	213
Spiritual Works of Mercy	214
Corporal Works of Mercy	214
Cinema Divina	215
Praying the News	216
Novena of Prayer for Celebrities	217
About Pauline Media Studies	219
Notes	221

#### **Foreword**

In My Previous career as a film and TV location scout in New York City, one of my favorite places to spend time was the Pauline Books and Media store that was once located in Midtown Manhattan next door to a Rand McNally Map shop, an essential repository for all location scouts in the days prior to the ubiquitousness of mobile phone GPS. While preparing to write this foreword, I discovered that, coincidentally, Sister Nancy Usselmann happened to be a manager at that bookstore's location when I would have frequented the shop, though we didn't know each other.

In my times perusing its vast collection of printed books and diverse array of religious items and gifts, the book center always seemed to be this out-of-place sanctuary in the midst of a manic metropolis. Simply stepping inside the store offered an inviting opportunity for a deeper connection to the Divine. It served as a spiritual oasis for me in a concrete desert of a city that often felt like it was too busy and unconcerned to even make room for God, though I eventually realized I simply needed to open my eyes and look a little deeper to see just what gems of spiritual relief my hometown actually offered. I kind of wished I'd spent more time reading and hanging out there than I did. Thankfully, once I moved to Los Angeles years later and got to officially meet and befriend the Daughters of St. Paul, I quickly discovered their West Coast brick-and-mortar bookstore. Same spiritual oasis, different distracted metropolis.

xii Foreword

Through my growing fraternity with the sisters—in part due to one of the many side gigs I worked at the time, which brought me into their store routinely—I would continue to find solace and respite there, specifically between the moments I was trying to hustle and muscle my acting career into existence. I have especially cherished my relationship with Sister Nancy, who has become a dear friend, a fellow musical collaborator (for the brief time I spent playing their annual Daughters of St. Paul Christmas Concert), and most importantly, an esteemed prayer warrior whose ministry and care for those in media is unparalleled. I've come to depend on the strength and support of Sister and the Daughters of St. Paul in a very real way, knowing that they have the interests and intentions of those working in the media industry at the core of their mission.

As the trend toward all things digital continues ever forward, the need for an intentional spiritual oasis is more evident than ever. Simply opening our news feed on our devices can provoke a sense of anxiety and overwhelm. We are bombarded with the fear-inducing headlines proliferated by news outlets keen on attracting ever-increasing indexes of eyeballs. Or by the dizzying array of attention-sapping distractions the vortex of social media presents to those seeking sanctuary and peace from the din of the twenty-first century.

The choices, the voices; the likes and the comments; the scrolling and the swiping; the ads and the marketing all seem to be contributing in both tacit and obvious ways to our increasing polarization and isolation from each other. None of it seems to be going away anytime soon.

As Sister Nancy describes it, research confirms that addiction to social media is both physical and psychological, and the negative effect on mental health and low self-esteem are also observable, and crucially so for young people and children.

So what can we do? What must we do to reclaim our health, our attention, our time, and ultimately our souls? How do we detach the digital umbilical cord and make more room to connect with the Divine Healer and our Eternal Redeemer, Jesus Christ?

Foreword xiii

How can we carve a path to peace within ourselves in order to attain what Saint Paul refers to as the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Phil 4:7)?

That's where this compelling volume comes in. Sister Nancy has prayerfully and skillfully assembled a powerful, practical, sixweek media fasting plan that anyone and everyone can follow. This book will help us take back that time and space we have given up to our brain's reward centers and replace it with the eternal spiritual reward of time spent in the presence and contemplation of the Lord; time spent in the company of others, which strengthens our community and allows us to see each other as whole persons and not just the "best of" we disclose as our digital selves; and time spent cultivating inner peace by centering ourselves in God, our Father and Creator, his Son, Jesus, and his Holy Spirit.

This reclaimed period of recharging will lead us to hope more in he who is our true hope and our true peace.

The variety of options Sister proposes are as diverse as they are personalized. Whether you want to go cold turkey for twenty-four hours or hard-core for a solid month, there's something here for everyone to begin unplugging. Scripture passages followed by daily reflections combine the profound with the relatable. The Prayers of Reparation, the Check-ins, and the Life Hacks are all sharp tools to keep you faithful and focused on your journey to ultimate spiritual health.

As I continue to surrender my own life and career to a deeper relationship with Christ, the demands of that career have inevitably led me to become more reliant on building social media platforms that reach many in order to glorify his message. I have not been exempted from the "swipe and scroll" epidemic that consumes more of my time than I both realize and like to admit. Sister Nancy's work in this book has shown me how even someone whose profession is directly impacted by an active online presence can benefit eternally by implementing a more Christ-centric plan for using social media, and by spending more time in prayer with him in order to truly and completely recharge.

xiv Foreword

In essence, by being less concerned about how many social media followers I have, with the guidance of this fast, I am more equipped to be a better follower of him whom I serve.

May the Lord bless you, recharge you, and bring you closer to him as you endeavor on your media fast.

—Jonathan Roumie

### Introduction

Do you ever feel sluggish, overwhelmed, or anxious after spending too much time in front of a screen? Do you sometimes feel guilty for spending too much money on your favorite game app? Does your media use negatively affect your relationships with God and others? Is it hard to set aside time for prayer each day? If you answered *yes* to any of these questions, then you're in the right place.

Technology is everywhere. The world runs on it. Life. Work. Entertainment. Relationships. We need our devices to connect. Yet, their constant presence and our continuous attachment to them can be all-consuming. We may also feel uncertain about how our relationship with God is relevant to our media use and how faith can play a role in our media choices. If you have ever experienced these struggles or asked these questions about your media, then a conscious, prayerful break might be helpful. Sometimes we need to detox our brains . . . and our souls!

Living our lives before a screen often leads to a disconnect from ourselves, diminishing our ability to cope and connect meaningfully with others. The fast-paced exchanges and excessive multitasking can leave us feeling fragmented, limiting our attention span on any one task and splitting the way we behave online from the way we act in person. We can also become disconnected from God, who promises true and lasting happiness.

The feeling of disconnect may be a clue that we need to regain a sense of ourselves as human beings, body and soul, and to

rediscover the beauty of our relationships. Paying attention to our relationship with God and allowing it to transform how we use our media is essential for our mental and spiritual health if we want to live happy and holy lives. Giving ourselves the space to consider what we most desire and what fulfills our souls can make a difference in how well we live with our technology.

One way to refocus is through media fasting.

### How to Use This Book

The first part of this book explains what fasting is, how to do a media fast, and the many benefits of fasting for the mind, body, and spirit. A guide to create your own fasting plan will help you assess your media experience and determine a plan that works for you.

The second part leads you through six weeks of short daily reflections. These reflections guide you to reflect on your media use, enhance your spiritual life, and support you in your fasting plan. Each week follows a theme: Paring Down to the Essentials, Choosing the Good Life, Being Media Mindful, Becoming Cultural Mystics, Creating Communion, and Transforming the Culture. The weekly topics build on each other to help you grow in your relationship with Christ and to reconsider your media use through the lens of that relationship. A weekly check-in invites you to test your progress and discern what you learned about yourself and Jesus in the process.

At the end of the book, the *Moving Forward with My Media* section will help you to take the insights and growth of your media fast into your everyday life, so that even when the fast is over, you can find greater peace by centering your media usage more on Christ. The various media prayers and practices in the appendices can help during the fast and long afterward.

Media fasting is an energy boost in your journey toward a healthy and holy existence within the media culture. This book

is a guide to recharge your life in Christ and challenge you to live more meaningfully. Remember, changing your media habits takes responsibility, commitment, and sacrifice. Only you can do that for yourself. But all is possible in and through Christ!

# PART 1 SPIRITUALLY DRAINED

## **Blessing and Curse**

There are those who let themselves be dragged by the current, but there are always those who direct everything to their own sanctification with joy and with edification.<sup>1</sup>

—Blessed James Alberione

Moses and the Israelites had to make a big decision. After escaping Pharaoh and his armies in the land of Egypt, they wandered in the desert for forty years. During that time, the people wearied of following the Lord's commands and worshiped idols. Death and destruction came upon them. God, speaking through Moses, renewed the covenant with his people by offering them two options: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (Deut 30:19). The blessings of prosperity and life involved loving the Lord and following his commands, knowing that he cares for his people. But if they instead refused to recognize God as Lord of their lives and turned to false gods and idol worship, they would experience the curse of hardship and exile—a path that would lead to death. The Israelites chose life.

Our digital experience can sometimes feel like a blessing or a curse. Media can provide instant access to news and entertainment, connect us with people all over the world, and heighten our awareness of global social issues. They can also cause harm through misuse and overuse. Engaging with false information, gossip, or pornography; believing that self-worth comes from likes and shares; experiencing digital burnout, stress, social isolation, spiritual depletion, and addiction—all these are "curses" we experience when we misuse or overuse our media.

Using media for my ministry and teaching about media, I recognize the blessings of these technologies as amazing gifts of God. But I sometimes feel the curse of too much screen time and its effects on my health, energy, and spiritual well-being. At one point, I realized that my digital devices were distracting me from focusing on what matters to me the most: God! Even my prayer time became riddled with notifications. Constantly distracted, I sensed the Holy Spirit nudging me to give God my whole mind and heart, not allowing my devices to compete for my attention. God invited me to pause and examine my actions. I decided then to fast from my media by setting parameters for daytime use and evening entertainment.

For some people, technology use tends to be moderate and non-problematic. For others, it borders on compulsive and excessive behavior that can become an addiction. The attention-grabbing nature of technologies plus our own weakness can cause us to struggle as we seek to change. Any process of change takes time, commitment, prayer, and patience with ourselves. We change when we recognize the blessing and the curse of our technology and take steps to retrieve the joy of life that God desires for us.

We can choose the blessing by living well with our screens. This involves ensuring that the time we spend using media is well balanced in a way that enhances our relationships with God and others. Otherwise, we may choose the curse by allowing media time to adversely affect our mental and spiritual wellbeing and our relationships, especially our relationship with God. Does our screen use give us life or lead to a disconnected, distracted death of the soul? If we lean toward the latter, it's time to make a change. That is why a media fast can be so helpful.

## What Is Fasting?

What is important is that the strings of our hearts be tuned for the melody which we want to play, that is, the chant, "Glory to God and peace to humanity."<sup>2</sup>

—Blessed James Alberione

When we hear the word "fasting," we may think of the common example of dietary fasting. A dietary fast abstains from all or some food or drink at specific periods of time. It can take the form of having two meals a day without snacking, eating smaller portions at meals, or staying away from specific ingredients such as gluten and processed sugar. Wellness websites promote intermittent fasting as a trendy regimen to make healthy choices. A noble practice, fasting strengthens self-control and moderation and can help us live healthier lives. Yet fasting is more than a dietary fad.

Fasting, in the Scriptures, is an act of opening or tuning our heart to God. When facing some significant disaster, the Chosen People fasted to call on God's mercy. Jesus fasted for forty days before starting his public ministry (see Mt 4:2). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that fasting is an intimate action between us and God.

To open our hearts to God, we can fast from all sorts of things besides food. Fasting as a spiritual discipline involves doing without something that gives us pleasure or in which we overindulge. This includes our technology. When we fast, we remove distractions, discipline our impulses, and examine our desires and motivations.

Fasting reminds us that only Jesus can fulfill all our deepest longings. He desires an intimate relationship with us. He wants to draw us into his self-communicative love, a love that generates life and holiness. Fasting leads us to a loving relationship with Jesus Christ because it attunes us to his presence in our souls. This is the key. We don't fast for fasting's sake. We fast to better love Jesus and our neighbor—the two greatest commandments. Fasting moves us out of our ego-centric world toward other people. That may all sound idyllic, but fasting requires a commitment that involves some type of sacrifice. It directs us to change our habits through self-discipline and to order our desires to a life of virtue. It's about choosing the good so that we can become the best version of ourselves, the person God created us to be.

A media fast can be challenging, but it's so worth it! By fasting from the media, we learn to do without it, as well as how to live with media in a healthy, balanced way. Fasting is not simply about giving something up and feeling its lack; it is, more importantly, about replacing what we give up with something that gives us life. Remember, God wants all of our minds and hearts! During this fast, we can replace the time we would normally spend on our screens with practices that nurture our relationship with Christ and others, such as prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, or works of mercy (see Appendix D for Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy). By setting aside time for an intentional fast, we can grow in understanding the role of digital media in our lives and invite Christ into our experience so to live well with our media moving forward.

#### Effects of Media Fasts

Let us not grow tired of fighting against concupiscence.... One of these is addiction to the digital media, which impoverishes human relationships . . . cultivate instead a more integral form of human communication made up of "authentic encounters," face-to-face and in person.<sup>3</sup>

—Pope Francis

Usually, when we choose to embark on an adventure, we do so to seek a benefit for ourselves. Doing a media fast provides many benefits to our physical, mental, and spiritual health.

- 1. Connecting with God—We fast so we can recognize with greater clarity God's grace at work in and around us. Fasting frees us to respond more generously to God, who pours his superabundant love upon us, and to grow in our ability to hear his voice. Eliminating some of the digital clutter from our lives makes room for us to spend time nurturing our relationship with the one who loves us. A strengthened relationship with Christ spills over into our daily life choices, including our media use, helping us make better media choices from this point forward.
- 2. Increased energy—Prolonged screen time can sap energy, especially if it is at night right before going to bed. The light of the screen sends dopamine to the brain, stimulating thought processes that prevent restful sleep. Disrupted sleep resulting from screen

time decreases our energy. Fasting from digital media one hour before bedtime can help us sleep better. We may also choose to limit screen time to take time for physical exercise. Physical activities increase the heart rate, supply oxygen to the blood cells, and so improve energy.

- 3. More focus—Scattered brain functions due to excessive screen use lessen awareness of the task at hand. Notifications and ads distract us and interrupt our focus. The instant gratification and incessant pace of online information decrease our attention spans. Breaking the habit of viewing things online that absorb or scatter our attention can retrain our brains to stay on task and pay attention for longer periods of time. So many drugs on the market offer intensified mental stimulus, but a digital fast is a cheaper and safer way to stimulate the brain and increase focus.
- 4. Inner peace—We sometimes use digital media as a replacement for boredom or an escape from difficult external situations. But filling our minds with disturbing news, violence, online arguments, other people's opinions of us, or content that makes us compare our lives with others' only disturbs our peace. Peace can be restored when we center ourselves in God. Putting aside the phone or other digital devices allows us to notice who and what is around us. We can thank God, the Creator of all, for the beauty we often miss when we're focused on our screens.
- 5. Better relationships—Digital fasts improve our relationships by helping us recognize other people as whole persons, not just the aspects of themselves they present online. We get to know people better the more we spend quality time with them. Paying attention only to our screens prevents us from truly seeing and hearing the other in front of us. Listening is an art. It's a learned practice to hear with our ears what another is saying. To listen with our mind and heart shows interest, concern, care, and love. The more we remove digital distractions while with others, the stronger will be the relationships that add to our quality of life.

## Ways of Media Fasting

Read the book of your own conscience, taking a little time out from useless reading and entertainment.<sup>4</sup>

—Blessed James Alberione

How does a media fast work? Just like fasting from food and drink, there are various ways to fast from media. These fasts can be intermittent, especially if we use screens for work or study. A fast can target specific media or apps, or center on conscious choices about what we post online and how often we create and engage with content. A digital detox, which removes the device or app for a significant period, is the most radical fast.

Here are some suggestions:

## **Daily Fasts**

- Set your phone on "do not disturb" from an hour before going to bed until an hour after you get up in the morning. A substantial amount of time without digital interruptions makes it more possible to have a peaceful evening and a complete night's rest.
- Use a screen time app that will lock you out of your social media or gaming apps at certain times, such as while you are at work or school or before you go to bed.

- Set your phone alarm or a timer for one hour or less to limit your video gaming, YouTube viewing, online reading of web comics or fan fiction sites, or any other online activity.
- Put a cap on in-game purchases for video games. Share your plan with gaming friends so they can help hold you accountable.
- Turn off all music, radio, or podcasts on your daily commute or while exercising.
- Give yourself only certain times during the day when you will check your phone notifications, such as at 9 am, 12 noon, and 6 pm. Silence your notifications so they will not go off at all hours of the day. This way you will avoid interruptions and not feel obliged to check your phone continually.
- Watch only one episode of a streaming series instead of binging the entire season. Plan ahead how many episodes you will watch and stick to it or set a time limit for your daily TV usage.
- Check or post on social media once a day, or only at times when you don't have other obligations. Limit how often you check for new likes or comments.
- When catching up with friends (coffee, lunch, dinner), suggest no phones during your gathering. In a non-aggressive way, challenge the others to go for one hour without checking their phones. See where the conversation goes!

#### 24-Hour Fasts

Turn off all your digital devices and store them away for a complete 24-hour period. Notice how many times you had the urge to turn your phone on during that time.

## Week-Long Fasts

- Stay off all social media for a week. Remove the apps from your phone.
- Avoid playing your favorite video game for one week.
- Turn off the radio when in your car, or fast from listening to music while exercising or doing chores for a week.
- Read a paper book rather than e-books, web comics, or fanfiction sites.
- Avoid shopping online for a week. Go to a brick and mortar store if you need something.

#### Weekend Fasts

- Do a 48-hour complete digital fast. Spend the weekend catching up with friends or family. Don't lock your phone away completely in case you might want to arrange a meeting with friends, but turn off your notifications and disable all apps except the phone and text messaging.
- Fast from all entertainment media for the weekend. Plan an outdoor activity or hands-on project instead.
- Use the time you would normally spend on media for a prayerful activity, such as reading Scripture or going to Eucharistic Adoration.

## Monthly Fasts

- Go for a month without your social media apps on your phone.
   Only check them when you are on your computer or tablet.
- Avoid that game app that sucks your time by removing it for one month. Evaluate what you did instead of that game.
- Give up watching YouTube videos and do something active instead.
- Shop in local, independent stores rather than online.

#### Seasonal Fasts

- The Church's liturgical season of Lent is six weeks long and Advent is four weeks. Media fasts can be a form of penance during these seasons. Delete problematic apps from your phone. Fast from them for the entire season of Lent or Advent. Use the time you'd spend on screens to add or deepen a spiritual practice (ideas are in the daily meditations).
- Ouring Lent or Advent, choose the movies or television you will watch and schedule when you will view them. Plan a movie night or watch a streaming show with friends and talk about it afterward using the *Cinema Divina* method (see Appendix D). Keep the other evenings free to meet with friends, attend a Church event, or read a spiritual book.

The type of plan you choose depends on your goals and how you want to invite Christ into your media experience.