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## Come fast in celebration of Ramadan

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Ramadan, the Islamic month in which Muslims fast daily from dawn to dusk, is likely to start on Aug. 22 and end on Sept. 19. Fasting is not an act of starvation but an act of worship. Its purpose is not to feel the pangs of hunger but to feel spiritual closeness to God. In preparation for the fast each day, families would awaken each other to have a pre-dawn meal, as recommended by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be on him.

During the fast, one cannot take any solid or liquid, or engage in sexual relations. If anyone has difficulty fasting due to travel, sickness, pregnancy or the like, they will not fast, but they must make up for it later in the year. Those who cannot make up for it are allowed to feed a poor person for each day they missed.

Children below the age of puberty are not required to fast but you often see them making a fuss insisting on fasting with their parents and elder siblings. It is considered good training to allow them when very young to fast partially during the day and to break their fast at midday and again with their elders at sunset. As they grow older they would be able to fast the entire day.

Fasting begins in a family setting, but ends in a community setting at the mosque at sunset. This is the most eagerly awaited time of the day. A few minutes before sunset and the mosque begins to fill up. You see the people silently reciting the Qur'an. Then the sun disappears below the horizon, and the muezzin says the call to prayer signaling the time for Iftar, the breaking of the fast. It was the practice of the Prophet Muhammad to break his fast with dates and water, and Muslims all over the world follow his example. They may indulge in other light snacks along with dates. Then everyone stands for prayer.

After prayer comes the main meal then an interval, not more than an hour, before the final prayer of the day. This prayer is well attended every night in the mosque because it is the time when the Qur'an is recited from beginning to end during the course of the month. It is also the longest prayer at any

time of the year. This year on the eastern seaboard of the United States, it will begin at approximately 9 p.m. and continue to about 11:30 p.m. Most of it is voluntary and anyone can leave early.

The Qur'an first started to be revealed in Ramadan and this is why Ramadan is to be celebrated every year by fasting (Chap. 2, V. 185). Also, extra emphasis is placed on reading and studying the Qur'an during this month. The Qur'an is a book that was revealed over a period of 23 years and gradually but completely changed the lives of the believers.

Initially, for many years it emphasized the correct beliefs. It gave them a clear understanding of God and a strong commitment to live a life that is pleasing to God. It told them of the consequences of evil and of the accounting in the Hereafter. It explained what virtue and vice are and taught them to uphold virtue and shun vice. All habits that are destructive to the individual or the society were declared vices, including lying, cheating, backbiting, slander, stealing, hoarding, niggardliness, alcoholism, gambling, fornication and adultery.

Later, after the migration of the Prophet and his companions from Mecca, where they had been persecuted, to Medina, the Qur'an established in detail laws pertaining to worship, family, earning a livelihood, crime, peace and security, etc. Various forms of worship, such as prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage were institutionalized in the young community. The instruction to fast in Ramadan was revealed in the second year after the migration.

Fasting has many benefits and was given to us by an All-Wise God Who knows human nature more than humans do. Human beings tend to slide from the lofty standards they set for themselves and to indulge in what is not good physically, morally or spiritually. Fasting helps to stop this downward slide and strengthens one's ability to say "no" to what is harmful, notwithstanding its attractiveness. How many we see fall because they cannot say no!

"A fasting person experiences two joys, when he breaks his fast and when he will meet his Lord," said Muhammad.

Come fast with us and experience its benefits!

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