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Ramadan, A Holy Fast
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For most Americans the holiday season means food -- rich, abundant and almost constantly served. We read a daily barrage of newspaper articles about the calorie count of the traditional holiday dinner and how much weight, on average, each American will gain. This year, the holiday season coincides with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. And the celebration of Ramadan requires fasting.

Ramadan is the ninth month in the Muslim lunar calendar. It is the holiest of the months, for it was during Ramadan that the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Because the lunar year is about 11 days shorter than the solar year, the season of Ramadan varies each year relative to our calendar. This year it begins on the new moon of Dec. 9, as calculated by the Islamic Society of North America.

The religious requirement to fast during Ramadan is established in the Qur'an. Muslims believe that Muhammad modeled proper observance for the fast. No one is to eat, drink (even water), or smoke from sunrise to sunset for the 28 days of the month. Married couples are to avoid conjugal relations during daylight hours as well. Despite the strain caused by fasting, each Muslim is to strive to act with patience and humility and to avoid anger.

Despite the strictness of these rules, Islam does not impose unreasonable hardships on individuals. Pregnant and nursing women and the aged are exempted from the fasting. Children are not allowed to fast until they are strong enough to do so and until they are old enough to clearly intend to fulfill the fast. The ill should fast at another time, after they have returned to health.

Muslims speak of numerous benefits of fasting. First, it focuses the mind on God. Second, it develops one's self-control and discipline. Third, it builds social solidarity among all Muslims through the communal experience of doing without. And experiencing hunger allows each Muslim to think about the needs of those who always go without -- the poor.

Each evening, Muslims end the day's fast by taking a little water, perhaps a few dates, and then saying prayers. The family then enjoys a light supper. Because everyone is eating at about the same time, friends and families often come together to share this evening meal. Ramadan is, like the Christmas holidays, a very happy and social time.