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JMJ

U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love You, save souls

O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

Volume two = The Penitent Christian

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

The Obligation of Fasting

“When he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterwards hungry.” Matt. 4:2.

Terrible Lent, are you back again? Must we again suffer hunger? Alas, how will I be able to stand that? Forty whole days, one after the other! It is too much; I shall die before Easter! Such are the complaints I seem to hear from some over-delicate Christians, who regard the obligation of fasting as an unendurable one, and shrink from it as they would from being flayed alive. But be comforted: it will not kill you. There is no doubt

I. That we can and must fast for forty days; and

II. That vain are the pretexts of many sensual Christians, to escape the prescribed fast.

I. We are bound to observe the forty days' fast; the law binding Christians to that effect is clear and well-known throughout the whole Catholic world. Neither is it a mere human law, nor an invention of the Popes, as some people imagine. But even if it were an invention of the Popes, and were imposed by them on the Church at large, would not that fact alone be a sufficient reason to make it obligatory on the conscience of every child of the Church? Not the least doubt of it. Nor is this law nearly as severe now as it was amongst the early Christians. The latter were obliged to abstain, not only from meat, but also from everything that comes from meat, such as eggs, milk, butter, etc; and not merely from that, but even from fish, spices, and wine. Hence, there was hardly anything they could eat except bread, salt, oil, and vegetables, and that only once a day, in the afternoon, for they knew nothing of a collation, and their evening repast was kept as strictly in the bounds of moderation as our collation now is. No one dreamed of asking a dispensation.

And is there any modern Christian who will try to excuse himself by saying that he cannot observe the Lenten precept, easy as it is, now-a-days, or that he is not bound to do so? Consider the sin of our first parents in Paradise. The holy Fathers can hardly find words strong enough to express the fearful malice of this first sin, whose consequences we, unhappy descendants of Adam, still bewail in this vale of tears. And yet what was Adam's sin? He ate of a fruit that God had forbidden him to touch. That was all. Now, to eat a piece of fruit, nay, even a whole apple, is (if we consider the matter alone), a very trifling affair. Why, then, should such a sin be reckoned as a most grievous one in the divine judgments, as such a fearful sin, that no man can understand its malice? St. Thomas of Aquin tells us why. The gravity of this offence must be measured by its circumstances, and not by the smallness of its matter; and, according to those circumstances, that sin was a most grievous one. What were they? The manner and the words in which God imposed the command on Adam: “And he commanded him, saying: Of every tree of Paradise thou shalt eat: but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat. For in what day so ever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death.” It was as if God wished to say: All these things you can use when and how you please but there is one tree that I reserve to myself, in order to test your obedi-

ence, and under pain of temporal and eternal death you are forbidden to taste of it. But what did Adam do? In the midst of the superabundant delights that were at his free disposal he stretched out his hand, in order to please his wife, to that one tree that he was forbidden to taste of under pain of death.

Now to our subject. Consider the vast number and variety of substances which God has prepared for the nourishment and food of man, in this, our earthly paradise? All kinds of crops in our fields, all kinds of fruit on our trees, all kinds of wholesome and nourishing vegetables in our gardens; then, what a great variety of animals, wild and tame, of birds, of domestic fowls, and of fishes in the waters. What a number of savory dishes can be made of those things that are procured from beasts! And the good God says, as it were, to each one of us Christians: Behold, all these things I give you to use as you please; eat and drink of them in moderation, when permissible, for the preservation of your strength and health. One article of food alone I reserve. You must now abstain from it for my sake, and that but for forty days. All the others, you can use once a day, till you are fully satisfied. Is it credible, my dear brethren that any true Christian can be found to object to such a reasonable command as this, or to say that it is too difficult to be observed? I can hardly imagine that any one would be so rebellious as to violate the precept of God in his Church by eating meat on a fast day or day of abstinence. And yet, alas, how many half-Catholics there are who refuse to observe this easy law! "We are not bound to fast in that way," they say; nay: "We cannot fast in that way!" Let us hear now some of their

II. *Vain excuses.*

All Catholics under twenty-one years of age, people of advanced age, laborers, the sick, the delicate, and the convalescent, pregnant and nursing mothers, all these have, indeed, good reason for saying that they cannot observe the law of fasting, at least as far as eating only one full meal in the day is concerned. Nowadays the sick and convalescent may even, if necessary, be dispensed from the precept of abstinence: such people being permitted to eat meat without violating the law of fasting. But alas! How many other people there are, of both sexes, whose self-love furnishes them with all sorts of pretexts, to evade the Christian law of fasting? While I am willing to admit that we are not lords and masters, but rather caretakers of our health, our bodies, and our lives, and therefore, that we are not allowed to neglect them altogether, it is also certain that we must care for the body only in so far as we may render it serviceable to the soul. Not our sensual appetites and our bodily comfort, but the eternal salvation of our immortal souls, should claim precedence in all things. How, then, can we dare to exempt ourselves from the observance of that precept of fasting that is given to all Christians in general?

Even your physician has no power to dispense you from the law of fasting. All he can do is to declare that you have a reasonable cause for asking a dispensation. If you are really as feeble as you declare; if your stomach is in bad order; if your head is so weak if you are really in danger of losing your health, and there is no other way of helping you, then, of course, says the doctor, you have good reason for asking a dispensation. But if your weakness is (as is generally the case), merely imaginary, if your fears are founded on self-love, sensuality, love of comfort, gluttony, and dread of self-denial and Christian mortification, then your dispensation, although a hundred doctors endorse it, is null and void in the sight of God. But (you say), I know by experience that fish is not good for me. Well, then, who compels you to eat fish? Let it be, and eat something else. But that would be difficult and hard to do quite so; and that is precisely the reason of the law of fasting; it must be hard and difficult.

Consider, I pray you, the vast numbers of poor people who, besides having to work hard every day, hardly see a bit of meat oftener than once or twice a year, while they are just as badly off with regard to fish; and yet they are able to enjoy good health on their fare of bread and vegetables. They can do without meat for a year at a time, while you are afraid to abstain from it for a few weeks during the Lent! How many people there are, of both sexes, in convents and monasteries, who spend their whole lives without eating meat, or anything that comes from meat; and yet they reach a ripe old age. St. Hilarion was eighty years old, St. Pachomaes a hundred and ten, SS. Antony, Arsenius, and Romuald lived to be a hundred and twenty. And what ascetic lives they led! Did they have meat outside of Lent? Or fish prepared with all kinds of delicious sauces during Lent? No, indeed; dry bread, herbs, and vegetables were their food, pure water their drink, and even these things they did not eat their fill of, unless on some great feast days. Thus they fasted the whole year through, sleeping nightly but a few hours on the bare ground and scourging and chastising their bodies in different ways. Yet, they enjoyed good health. Idle, self-indulgent worldlings, who among you, ever attains to such a hale old age, as the Fathers of the desert did, in spite of their fasting and austerities? Yes, you reply: but people in those days were different.

Yes, they were different; they were more pious, God-fearing, and desirous of their salvation than we are. All that is required of you and me, O Christian, is to abstain from meat, and to eat a full meal but once a day, during Lent; and behold! We are so weak and delicate, that we must ask a dispensation in the very first week of Lent! Ah! Unmortified invalids, you have strength enough for many other things, far more injurious to the health than abstinence from meat! For instance, you are invited to an evening party, at which you spend half the night eating, drinking, dancing, and otherwise amusing yourself; so that it is quite late when you go home. Before accepting the invitation, do you go to consult the doctor as to whether it is good for your health to appear at such a party? "What an extraordinary question!" You say: "Why should I ask the doctor about such a thing?" But are you not afraid of getting ill, or of putting your head or stomach out of order, since you are so weak and delicate? Are you not afraid of injuring yourself by walking or driving through the cold air, late at night, in wind and rain, sleet and snow, depriving yourself at the same time of your night's rest? No, you say; I can endure that easily enough, and find a pleasure in it. Well, if such is the case, you must have a strong constitution! To get up an hour earlier than usual in the morning, and go through the cold air to Mass; to suffer some discomfort for the purpose of assisting at some public devotion on weekdays, or at a sermon on Sundays, that, I am well aware, is bad for the health, and is sure to affect the head and the lungs injuriously; but I thought it was just as bad when one went out to parties in similar circumstances. "No," you answer; "I have never found that to be the case!" "Truly, I see now that you must have a strong constitution indeed! And when you have spent four or five hours dancing and go out of a warm room into the cold night air, and then into the warmth of your own house again, do you not find that injurious to your health?" "No, not at all!" Wonderful, indeed, must your constitution be! And when you eat or drink to excess, or fill your stomach with all kinds of fruit, sweetmeats, liquors, and ices at entertainments, are your head and stomach always in good order? "Yes, I can bear all that without difficulty, nor does it make me the least ill." Certainly, you must be a very healthy person! For all doctors maintain that nothing is more injurious to the health than to eat and drink to excess, especially, when different kinds of food and drink are used at the same time. And some have told me, too, that there is nothing more apt to cause colds and catarrhs, than the night air, and sudden changes from heat to cold, and from cold to heat. "Let doctors say what they will, I have done it over and over again, and it has not hurt me!" Then, your constitution must be a very strong one!

But tell me is not this constitution of yours the same during Lent? Up to Ash Wednesday, you have been so strong and healthy that nothing could hurt you; yet, now, you are so weak, that, if you abstain from meat for a time, you are sure to get sick? Ah, Christians, is it possible that one can endure anything to please the world, or to gratify the senses and the desires of the flesh while, if there is question of obeying the law of God and the Church, all our strength is gone, the head is too weak, the stomach too delicate, we fear we may grow sick and die?

But what will all these excuses avail before the omniscient God, who cannot be deceived, and who well knows what each one is able to bear? What will they avail before that Judge of whom the prophet David says: "He shall judge the world with justice, and the people with his truth!" (Ps. 95:13.) Mark these words, weak Christians; in his own divine truth, he will judge the world, and not according to your idle imagination. You refuse to fast, you unlawfully eat flesh meat in order to preserve your health and prolong your life; but have a care, lest, in punishment of your disobedience, God may deprive you of health and life together.

My dear Christians, unless evident necessity requires otherwise, let us strictly observe the Law of God and of the Catholic Church. If self-love and sensuality try to persuade you that you cannot observe the general law of fasting, make them the same answer that St. Augustine once made in another matter "Why should I not do what these men and women have done?" So many Christians have kept the law of fasting for so many centuries, even when it was so strict that both fish and flesh were forbidden; why, then, should I not observe it, now that it is made so easy? So many religious of both sexes can fast during almost the entire year; why should not I fast for forty days? At all events, God has appointed the fast, and my mother, thy holy Church, has imposed it on her children! This alone, should induce me to show myself publicly her obedient child. And even if fasting should be somewhat more difficult to me than to others (who try to evade it by all sorts of vain pretexts), yet my soul and my flesh will have all the more consolation in God; and when the joyful season of Easter comes, I will be able to sing more heartily the glorious *Alleluia*. Amen.

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