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INTRODUCTION :

The Loss *of a* Tradition

“What happened to fast and abstinence in the Church in the United States?” Pope John Paul II asked me this question over dinner when we sat together in the refectory of the North American College in Rome on February 22, 1980. The Holy Father, soon after his election as pope, had visited the United States and evidently was surprised by what he perceived to be the collapse of these venerable practices. Such a change was especially noteworthy among American Catholics, who were brought up to believe that Church laws regarding fast and abstinence were serious obligations and their infraction was a mortal sin. Looking around a restaurant on any Friday in America, for instance, you could almost tell who the Catholics were by what they had on their plates. Fish on Friday and fasting during Lent and before major feasts created a whole rhythm of life among Catholics, even in countries where the laws were less strictly observed.

Special cuisines such as the “supper of the seven fishes” on Christmas Eve in Italy were created to accommodate these rules.

One event that precipitated such momentous change throughout the world can be dated, February 17, 1966, when Pope Paul VI issued the apostolic constitution on fast and abstinence, *Poenitemini*. The clear intent of the document, in keeping with the spiritual renewal undertaken by the Second Vatican Council, was to rescue fasting from the legalism and minimalism into which it had fallen. While this document paid tribute to the ancient penitential practices, it asserted that they did not fit easily into the circumstances in which people live today. It suggested that the practice of the virtue of penance today could be translated, for example, into faithfulness to our occupational duties, acceptance of the vexations that accompany our work environment every day, and patient enduring of the trials of modern life with all its insecurities, in addition to the traditional practices.¹ The constitution goes on to recommend voluntary, self-chosen penances such as works of charity on behalf of the poor as complements to or even substitutes for fasting. The old custom of “giving things up” for Lent thus became disparaged as something negative, while “doing things for others” was seen as more positive.

In keeping with this new approach, the Mass prayers for Lent underwent change. While the old Prefaces to the Eucharistic Prayer stressed fasting and penance and their benefits, the new prayers also emphasized deeds of charity and other virtuous acts as good preparations for the reception of Easter joy. The character of Lent thereby was given a somewhat different focus.

Another development in the Church growing out of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council also affected the way Catholics came to regard Church laws in themselves. In the council's decree on priestly formation, a new approach to moral theology was envisioned, more biblically based and positive in outlook, freed of the legalism of the past.² Before the council, moral theology had become an offshoot of canon law. When canon law, for example, stated that the Church's laws regarding fast and abstinence from meat were of "serious obligation," moralists translated this to mean that any conscious violation meant that a "mortal sin" had been incurred. These are, however, different categories, morally speaking, and the effect was that the ancient religious tradition regarding fast and abstinence became cast in legalism and negativity. The moral theology after the council rightly sought to overcome this legalism, but it had the unexpected consequence of bringing about a greatly reduced estimation and practice of these essential religious obligations.

A striking example of the old mentality was given me by a priest who described his deceased grandmother as a true expert in matters of fast and abstinence. Although, he said, she considered herself to be a faithful Catholic, she boasted of the fact that she had never fasted in her entire life. At a young age she married a laboring man and, according to canon law, a laboring man and his family were exempted from the laws of fasting because of the rigorous nature of his work. The grandmother was over the age of sixty when her husband died and so once again, according to Church law, she was exempt. The grandmother's conclusion, the priest stated, was that fasting was something made up by the bishops and had nothing at all to do with Jesus! The legalism

around fasting in which she had been reared prevented her from seeing its religious value for herself.

In this book I propose a renewal of the practice of fast and abstinence based upon a deeper understanding of its role in our religious life. Prayer, fasting, and charity, as we will see, are the three pillars of Old Testament piety that were taken over and confirmed in the New Testament. In the Book of Tobit, a classic text of Jewish piety, we read, “Prayer with fasting and alms with uprightness are better than riches with iniquity” (Tb 12:8). Jesus in his foundational sermon on discipleship, the Sermon on the Mount in St. Matthew’s Gospel, made specific reference to these pillars as part of the greater righteousness to which he was calling his followers (Mt 6:1–18). By his personal example of fasting forty days, Jesus laid the foundations for what would become for the whole Church the communal preparation for the celebration of Easter, the Christian feast of feasts (Mt 4:1–11; Lk 4:1–13).

The first charge given in the gospels by Jesus to his disciples is, “Repent and believe the gospel!” (Mk 1:15). This is why the obligations to pray, fast, and do works of charity are so central. They are the most important means to accomplish our repentance, our turning away (literally, “conversion”) from sinfulness. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches through fasting, our conversion is directed to ourselves; through prayer, our conversion focuses us upon God; and through almsgiving, our conversion expresses itself in compassionate concern for our neighbor.³

The Body Is the Soul's Workshop

As we will see later in this book, the ascetics who lived the Christian life in the Egyptian desert in the fourth and fifth centuries, through their witness and teachings, have given us great wisdom about the necessity of fast and abstinence in our lives. They became convinced that the condition of the body reflects the condition of the soul. An undisciplined body reveals an undisciplined soul. Body and soul have a reciprocal influence upon each other because they are dimensions of each person's identity. These desert fathers also became aware, by the deep soul work in which they engaged in their solitary existence, that the achievement of purity of heart and the capacity to practice divine charity required control of the unruly self and all its desires.

To achieve these goals, fasting is as essential now as it was then. For other reasons people today recognize the need to pay more attention to our bodies. Hermitages were popular then; now it's health spas, gyms, and physical fitness clubs, where guidance and coaching are provided by trainers performing roles similar to the spiritual directors of the past. But like the early Christian practitioners, we know we have to look deeply within ourselves in order to achieve better balance and greater happiness. Just as there is no substitute for working out in the gym in order to train the body, so there is no substitute for fasting—for example, by doing works of charity—in order to achieve the purity of heart that we seek. The ancients, we realize, were correct in their conviction that prayer and fasting are needed if true charity, unhindered by our selfishness, is to take place at all.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was the first ecumenical council to give specific attention to lay Christians

and their specific vocation as disciples of Christ. The council declared that

all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. . . . In the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God and who obey the voice of the Father, worshiping God the Father in spirit and in truth."⁴

In Catholicism, therefore, there is no such thing as “second-class citizenship,” with monks pursuing perfection and everyone else confined to more earthly pursuits. What is often forgotten, however, is that the ascetic practices developed by the monks in accordance with scripture must find a place in every life if the same perfection is to be achieved. Lent in fact had its origin, in part, in the desire to make monastic asceticism part of every Christian’s life.

In her introduction to Patrick Leigh Fermor’s classic book on monasticism, *A Time to Keep Silence*, Karen Armstrong describes how the Benedictine monks of Cluny, near Paris, carried out evangelization in the eleventh century—not by mere catechetical instruction, which does not automatically bring with it a conversion of life, but by an experience, limited and for a time, of monastic rigors. Even a limited experience of the monastic life can introduce people to the real meaning of religion far more effectively than abstract theological beliefs. Thus the monks of Cluny, in their effort to educate the laity of Europe, sent them on pilgrimage, which, under the aegis of Cluny, became a hugely popular activity. While they traveled to their holy destination—to Rome, Compostella, or a local shrine—laymen and laywomen had to live for a time like

monks. The pilgrims turned their backs on their normal lives and lived a communal life; they prayed together, they were celibate for the duration of the pilgrimage, and they were forbidden to fight or bear arms. Moreover, the hardships of the journey were experienced as a form of asceticism. In all, the experience was designed to transform their behavior in such a way that they would come to know the deeper meaning of Christian faith.⁵

In my two visits to Buddhist lands, I was impressed with how many laypeople were proud to tell us about the periods of time they spent in monastic training. For us Westerners, “temporary” monasticism is not known as such, but perhaps there is much wisdom in this practice as the monks of Cluny demonstrated by their popular pilgrimages.

Another good effect of a revival of fast and abstinence in the Church would be the reassertion of religious identity among Catholics. Leaving much up to individual choice and personal preference in our penitential practices has the tendency to deprive us of the group élan and mutual encouragement so necessary in religious life and so basic to human life in general. In a recent study reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, obesity was found to spread like a virus from person to person, especially among friends, family members, and sometimes neighbors. Doing things together, so much a part of being human, has huge effects, both positive and negative. The greatest religious phenomenon in the world today is Ramadan, during which millions of people all over the world, together, publicly fast and pray. Basketball fans will always remember the example of Hakeem Olajuwon, who starred in the playoffs for the Houston Rockets in 2006 and did so while fasting during the month of Ramadan.

How much our secularized world needs such demonstrations of religious practice and personal sacrifice.

Our National Eating Disorder

In a much-read and -discussed book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, Michael Pollan describes what he diagnoses as “our national eating disorder.” He attributes this condition to something missing in contemporary America, namely, deeply rooted traditions surrounding food and eating.⁶ Pollan describes eating as not only a biological act, but also one that is ecological and political in its meaning and consequence. I would add that eating is also something more—a religious act that celebrates our deepest ties to God, the earth, and one another. Thinking of eating in this way helps us realize how greatly reduced and less satisfying eating has become when it is nothing more than a refueling exercise engaged in alone and on the run.

Our national eating disorder explains how dieting has replaced fasting for many people. People diet, of course, in order to achieve better health. Often, however, dieting becomes an obsession if individuals have absorbed cultural models of beauty and attractiveness that are inhuman and oppressive and that cause them to hate themselves and their bodies. News reports in the early years of this century about six aspiring young models from Brazil who within a six-month period starved themselves to death do not surprise us. No wonder in Milan and Madrid women who are overly thin have been banned from participation in fashion shows, as they are considered dangerous role models. The psychological problems of anorexia and bulimia are very complex and

difficult to treat. For persons so suffering, the notion of being overweight becomes something horrific and repulsive. In this regard Aelred Squire, a scholar of early Church history, has made this helpful observation:

It may well be thought that Western man in particular has reached such a degree of psychological alienation from his body that to help him to fast and to mortify his bodily life without helping him to change his attitude towards it is to try to push him further in the direction which, if left to himself, he must in the end inevitably accomplish his own destruction.⁷

In October 2005 the Australian musician Keith Urban entered the Betty Ford rehabilitation center in California. There was no one large crisis, he explained, but a lot of small things that together made his life “unmanageable.” Urban said he found the regime of recovery at the center so helpful that he remained there ninety days instead of the usual thirty. What he received was not merely assistance in giving up unhealthy habits, but new insights about how to live. As he put it, “Abstinence was one thing, but there was all this other area of my life to start learning about.” He concluded with this observation: “Abstinence is the ticket into the movie, it is not the movie.”⁸

The July 16, 2007, issue of *Time* magazine had as its cover story, “How We Get Addicted: New brain research is helping us understand why we get hooked—and how we may get cured.” Its author, Michael D. Lemonick, argued that the solution to addiction is not something like Alcoholics Anonymous, which Lemonick dismisses as non-professional and unscientific, but rather new designer drugs that show promise in cutting off the craving that drives an addict toward relapse. What

these drugs do is change the chemistry of the brain and repair previous brain damage.

In my view this is but another instance, so common in our day, of the attempt to use drugs to treat illness and avoid the difficult task of treating the person who has the illness. Addiction often is not merely a chemical problem but also a spiritual one. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) recognizes this truth in its own “unscientific” way, using what the article describes as “folk wisdom.” AA confronts the person who is addicted and requires the person’s active involvement in the cure. It also provides the personal support that is crucial in the ninety days of recovery when the brain can re-set itself. The spiritual gains in the AA approach are many and life-shaping: personal responsibility, mending relationships, acceptance of support from others and, even more critically, the fervent petition for divine grace to overcome the power of the addiction which human willpower alone cannot achieve.

In this book it is my intention to re-introduce Catholics and others to the life-enhancing practices of fasting and abstinence, and to the vision of life upon which these are based. Abstinence and dieting alone are merely “tickets into the movie,” as Keith Urban helpfully observed; they are not the movie itself—our life as we must live it. Jesus declared, “I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full” (Jn 10:10). Fasting and abstinence are part of this greater life that God intends for all of us.

Recovering the Christian Practice of Fasting

In 1983 Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, was invited to give the Lenten retreat to the pope and his curia

at the Vatican. I found his reflections on the first Sunday of Lent to be particularly sharp and beneficial:

Jesus' road begins with the forty days of fasting, as did those of Moses and Elijah. Jesus told the disciples that a certain kind of demon is not to be cast out in any other way than by prayer and fasting. Cardinal Willebrands [Cardinal Johannes Willebrands at that time was president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity] told me that after the talks with the [Coptic Church], their patriarch in Egypt said that at the end of his visit to Rome, "Yes, I have understood that our faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is identical. But I have found that the Church of Rome has abolished fasting and without fasting there is no church."

The primacy of God is not really achieved if it does not also include man's corporality. The truly central actions of man's biological life are eating and reproduction, sensuality. Therefore virginity and fasting have been from the beginning of the Christian tradition two indispensable expressions of the primacy of God, of faith in the reality of God. Without being given corporal expression also, the primacy of God with difficulty remains of decisive moment in man's life. It is true that fasting is not all there is to Lent, but it is something indispensable for which there is no substitute. Freedom in the actual application of fasting is good and corresponds to the different situations in which we find ourselves. But a communal and public act of the Church seems to be no less necessary than in past times, as a public testimony to the primacy of God and of spiritual values, as much as solidarity with all who are starving. Without fasting we shall in no way cast out the demon of our time.⁹

These words of the future Pope Benedict XVI provide an excellent summary of the themes of this book.

The chapters of this book strive to show the profound connection between body and soul illuminated by the practice of fasting. In the first chapter, I provide a brief history of fasting in the Church, as well as an overview of its contemporary practice in the Western and Eastern churches. In the second chapter we explore the practice of fasting in the scriptures. The next two chapters describe the crucial role of fasting in the achievement of humility before God, the overcoming of our selfishness and unruly desires, and the personal discipline required to prepare our bodies for their glorious transformation by the power of Christ's resurrection. The fifth chapter shows the profound links between charity and fasting as they manifest themselves in a type of fasting that takes into account the most impoverished and vulnerable among us. In chapter 6 we will propose a program of fasting and prayer that incorporates the values we strive to honor in our earthly journey to God. Finally, because this book is intended not only to help readers theologically reflect on fasting, but also to practice it in their own lives, at the end of each chapter I include suggestions for reflection that are meant to help lead to such practice.