

# Thoughts on the Benefits of the System of Fasting Enjoined by Our Church

by J.H. Newman

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*The Church's system of fasting is a means of spiritual growth, discipline, and protection, and it provides guidance in the performance of duty.*

**Scripture:** 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 35:13, Isaiah 58:6, Joel 2:12, Matthew 6:16, Mark 2:18, Luke 18:12, Romans 14:6, 1 Corinthians 9:27, James 4:8

**Topics:** "Fasting And Prayer", "Spiritual Discipline"

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## Description

John Henry Newman preaches about the importance of adhering to the Church's regulations on fasting, emphasizing the practical wisdom and spiritual experience of the early Church Fathers who established these practices. He highlights the benefits of regular fasting, such as humbling oneself for sins, deepening communion with God, promoting self-denying charity, and uniting the Church in prayer and humility. Newman encourages individuals to overcome obstacles and misconceptions, reminding them of the historical significance and spiritual value of fasting as a discipline for the soul.

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## Transcript

To a person but little accustomed to observe any stated Fasts, the directions given by our Church on this subject, would probably occasion two very opposite feelings. On the one hand, he would be struck by the practical character and thoughtfulness evinced by some of the regulations; on the other, he would probably feel repelled by the number of days, and the variety of occasions, which the Church has appointed to be hallowed. Most Christians, who really loved their SAVIOUR, (unless prevented by the habits of early education,) would probably see something appropriate and affectionate in the selection of the Friday, for a weekly commemoration of their SAVIOUR'S sufferings, and of humiliation for their own sins which caused them; or, at all events, they would feel that there was some thoughtfulness in the direction annexed, that this weekly Fast should not interfere with the Christian joyousness brought back by the Festival of their LORD'S Nativity when these should in the cycle of years coincide. Again, if they should fail to appreciate the wisdom of appointing certain days to be kept sacred in memory of the holy men who left all to follow CHRIST, and consequently should be rather deterred than attracted, by observing that many of these days were ushered in by a preceding Fast; still they would hardly fail to be struck by the provision, that this previous fast should not interfere with the Christian's weekly Festival of his LORD'S Resurrection, but that "if any of these Feast-days should fall upon a Monday, then the

Fast-day should be kept on the Saturday, not upon the Sunday next before it." Again, he must observe, that during certain periods of the Church's year, which are times of especial joy to the faithful Christian, those, namely, which follow the Nativity and the Resurrection, these preparatory Fasts are altogether omitted. Some or other of these regulations would probably strike most thoughtful minds, as instances of consideration and reflection in those who framed them. The clergy, more especially, would appreciate, abstractedly at least, the imitation of the Apostolic practice of Fasting, when any are to be ordained to any holy function in the Church; and some probably will feel mournfully, that if the Church were now more uniformly to observe those acts of Fasting and Prayer, which were thought needful, before even Paul and Barnabas were separated for GOD'S work, we should have more reasonable grounds to hope, that many of our Clergy would be filled with the spirit of Barnabas and Paul.

On the other hand, it is naturally to be expected, that one not accustomed to any outward restraint in this matter, would feel indisposed to ordinances so detailed; that although he could reconcile to himself the one or the other of these observances, which most recommended themselves to his Christian feelings, he would think the whole a burdensome and minute ceremonial, perhaps unbefitting a spiritual worship, and interfering with the liberty wherewith CHRIST has made him free. This is very natural; for we are by nature averse to restraint, and the abuse of some maxims of Protestantism, such as the "right of private judgment," has made us yet more so: we are reluctant to yield to an unreasoning authority, and to submit our wills, where our reason has not first been convinced; and the prevailing maxims of the day have strengthened this reluctance; we have been accustomed to do, "every one that which was right in his own eyes," and are jealous of any authority, except that of the direct injunctions of the Bible: in extolling also the spirituality of our religion, we have, I fear, intended covertly to panegyriser our own, and so, almost wilfully withdraw our sight from those more humbling provisions, which are adapted to us, as being yet in the flesh: in our zeal for the blessed truths of the cross of CHRIST, and of our sanctification by the HOLY SPIRIT, we have begun insensibly to disparage other truths, which bring us less immediately into intercourse with GOD, to neglect the means and ordinances, which touch not upon the very centre of our faith.

The practical system of the Church is altogether at variance with that which even pious Christians in these days have permitted themselves to adopt; much which she has recommended or enjoined would now be looked upon as formalism, or outward service: in our just fear of a lifeless formalism, we have forgotten that wherever there is regularity, there must be forms; that every Christian feeling must have its appropriate vehicle of expression; that the most exalted act of Christian devotion, that our closest union with our SAVIOUR, is dependent upon certain forms; that the existence of forms does not constitute formalism; that where the Spirit of CHRIST is, there the existence of forms serves only to give regularity to the expression, to chasten what there might yet remain of too individual feeling, to consolidate the yet divided members "in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the SON of GOD unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of CHRIST."

Yet, as in every case in which the current of prevailing opinions, either in faith or practice, has for some time set in one direction, there have not been wanting indications, that Christians have felt their system incomplete; that there was something in the tranquil piety of former days, which they would gladly incorporate into the zealous excitement of the present; that although religion is in one sense strictly individual, yet in the means by which it is kept alive it is essentially expansive and social; that the only error here to be avoided, is a reliance upon forms; that the forms themselves, as soon as they are employed to realize things eternal, and to cherish man's communion with his SAVIOUR, become again

spiritual and edifying.

It is accordingly remarkable, in how many cases individuals have of late been led back by their own Christian experience to observances, in some respect similar to those which the Church had before suggested and provided for them. In the more advanced stages of their Christian course, or when, by a period of sickness or distress, GOD has granted them a respite from the unceasing circle of active duty, they have seen the value of those rites, the scrupulous adherence to which they once regarded as signs of lifelessness. In either case they would willingly own, that the union provided by the Church is not only more ordered, and less liable to exception, than one which individuals could frame; but also, that, as being more comprehensive, it would more effectually realize their objects.

It is granted, then, that the proportion of the Fast Days enjoined by the Church will, to persons unaccustomed to observe them, appear over-large, and the variety of the occasions for which they are adapted, over-minute and arbitrary. The question, however, occurs, whether we ought to be influenced by such considerations to reject the entire system, or whether, we ought not rather to be moved by the indications of a practical character evinced in some regulations, to make the trial of those, whose benefit we do not at present discern.

Now it would seem plain that, in a practical matter, he who from the traces of wisdom or thoughtfulness in one regulation should infer the probable wisdom and reasonableness of others emanating from the same source, would act more wisely than one, who, on account of the apparent unreasonableness and superfluity of some provisions, should proceed to condemn the whole. For in practical matters, the great test of the expediency of any habit, for which we have not direct divine authority, is experience: they only who have tried a line of conduct, or narrowly watched its effects upon others, can speak with certainty as to its result.

Of all the lesser courses of action, which tend so powerfully to form our moral habits, it would be impossible probably, for one who had not tried their effect, to predict certainly what that effect would be: or if we could guess the nature of the effect, certainly we should be able to foresee its degree and amount. With the exception of gross and flagrant sins, whose character and wages we know from authority, there is probably no one line of action, with regard to which we might not before hand prove very plausibly to ourselves, that it would not have the effects, to which it is in fact tending, and which we afterwards perceive to have been its natural results.

Yet such abstract reasonings about the possibilities or tendencies of things would not be listened to in any other case. When sick, men easily listen to the means, however improbable, by which any disease, resembling their own, was removed. Be it a poison, which they are bidden to take, yet if it be proved satisfactorily that, in cases like their own, that poison has been the messenger of health, they would not hesitate. They would listen to no abstract reasonings, that it was improbable that what had been an instrument of death could be their life; they would look to those, whom it had restored to health, and would do the like.

The sight of one person, undeniably raised from a state of death to life, would affect men more than any a priori demonstration that the medicine was pernicious or deadly. Much more then, since this medicine has been recommended to us by the great Physician of our souls; since it has been beneficial, wherever it has not been substituted for all other means of restoring or maintaining our spiritual health. The only question open to us, is, whether Fasting be in itself beneficial, this has been determined for us by GOD

Himself, but—whether certain regulations concerning it tend to promote or to diminish its efficacy; and in this case, the testimony of those who have proved their value, is manifestly of primary importance; the pre-conceived opinions of such as have not tried them, are but mere presumptions.

When then, in the regulations preserved in our Church, we find instances of thought which imply that the framers of these rules formed them upon their own experience, or again, when in the histories of these holy men, we see that they habitually practised what they inculcated, we have evidence of the value of their advice, which we may not, without peril of injury to our souls, neglect.

It was in part, by some such process as the preceding, that the writer of these pages was led to consider what people have come habitually to regard as the less solemn Fasts of the Church, and now ordinarily pay less regard to; for the first day of Lent, and the annual commemoration of our SAVIOUR'S sufferings, are, I suppose, still very commonly observed. As the history of every mind is, under some modifications, the mirror of many others, it may to some be useful to see by what course of reflection or experience an individual was brought to feel the value of the regulations of the Church in this respect.

It will perhaps to some seem strange to find placed among the foremost of these advantages, the Protection thereby afforded—protection against one's self; protection against the habits and customs of the world, which sorely let and hinder one in systematically pursuing what one imagines might be beneficial. I speak not, of course, of any known duty; in that case the opinion or practice or invitations of the world were nothing: but with regard to those in definite duties or disciplines, which one thinks may be performed as well at one period as at another, and which on that very account are frequently not performed at all, or at best occasionally only, and superficially.

No thoughtful Christian will doubt of the propriety and duty of fasting, whatever he may understand by the term. "The bridegroom is taken away from us, and so we must fast in these days:" the Apostles were "in fastings often:" in fastings, as well as in sufferings for the Gospel, or by pureness, by knowledge, by all the graces which the HOLY GHOST imparted, they approved themselves the Ministers of GOD. Our blessed SAVIOUR has given us instructions how we ought to fast, and therefore implied that His disciples would fast: He has promised that His Father, in the sight of all the Holy Angels, shall reward the right performance of this exercise: how then should it not be a duty?

"Our LORD and SAVOUR," says Hooker, "would not teach the manner of doing, much less propose a reward for doing, that which were not both holy and acceptable in GOD'S sight." And yet, after all the allowances which can be made for that fasting which is known to our FATHER only who seeth in secret, one cannot conceal from one's self that this duty is in these days very inadequately practised. It is, in fact, a truth almost proverbial, that a duty which may be performed at any time, is in great risk of being neglected at all times.

The early Christians felt this, and appointed the days of our Blessed SAVIOUR'S betrayal and crucifixion, the Wednesday and Friday of each week, to be days of fasting and especial humiliation. Those days, in which especially the bridegroom was taken away, the days, namely, in which He was crucified and lay in the grave, were, besides, early consecrated as Fasts by the widowed Church. Nor was it because they were in perils, which we are spared; because they were in deaths oft, that they practised or needed this discipline.

Quite the reverse. Their whole life was a Fast, a death to this world, a realizing of things invisible. It was when dangers began to mitigate, when Christianity became (as far as the world was concerned) an easy

profession, it was then that the peril increased, lest their first simplicity should be corrupted, their first love grow cold! Then those who had spiritual authority in the Church increased the stated Fasts, in order to recall that holy earnestness of life, which the recentness of their redemption, and the constant sense of their SAVIOUR'S presence, had before inspired.

Fasts were not merely the voluntary discipline of men, whose conversation was in heaven; they were adopted and enlarged in periods of ease, of temptation, of luxury, of self-satisfaction, of growing corruption.

To urge that Fasts were abused by the later Romish Church, is but to assert that they are a means of grace committed to men; that they would subsequently be unduly neglected, was but to be expected by any one, who knows the violent vacillations of human impetuosity. It was then among the instances of calm judgment in the Reformers of our Prayer-Book that, cutting off the abuses which before prevailed, the vain distinctions of meats, the luxurious abstinences, the lucrative dispensations, they still prescribed, Fasting "to discipline the flesh, to free the spirit, and render it more earnest and fervent to prayer, and as a testimony and witness with us before GOD of our humble submission to His high Majesty, when we confess our sins unto Him, and are inwardly touched with sorrowfulness of heart, bewailing the same in the affliction of our bodies ."

Our Reformers omitted that, which might be a snare to men's consciences; they left it to every man's Christian prudence and experience, how he would fast; but they prescribed the days upon which he should fast, both in order to obtain an unity of feeling and devotion in the members of CHRIST'S body, and to preclude the temptation to the neglect of the duty altogether. Nor is the interference in this matter any thing insulated in our system, or one which good men would object to, had not our unhappy neglect of it now made it seem strange and foreign to our habits. In some things we are accustomed to perform a duty, which is such independently of the authority of the Church, in the way in which the Church has prescribed, and because she has so appointed. We assemble ourselves together on the LORD'S day, because GOD has directed us by His Apostle not to forsake such assemblies; but we assemble ourselves twice upon that day rather than once, not upon any reason of the abstract fitness of so doing, but because the Church has prescribed it. And yet we should rightly think, that it argued great profaneness of mind and a culpable carelessness of our privileges, if we were habitually to neglect this ordinance, one the ground that GOD has not in His Word directly enjoined it, And probably, at an early period of our lives, (perhaps even later, when indisposition or indolence or any prevailing temptation has beset us,) there are few amongst us who have not owed their regular perseverance in public worship to this ordinance of the Church: there is no one assuredly who having broken this ordinance, has afterwards by GOD'S mercy been brought back to join more uniformly in the public worship of his GOD and SAVIOUR, who has not been thankful for this restriction. This then is protection.

Again, to search the Scriptures is a duty expressly enjoined by OUR SAVIOUR. The Church has stepped in to direct this study, and prescribed that nearly the whole of the O. T. should be read in each year, the N. T. thrice in the same period, the Psalms once every month. Since our Daily Service has been nearly lost, many pious individuals, it is well known, have habitually read just that portion which the Church has allotted. Now, laying aside certain cases in which this duty will be lifelessly performed, (for such there will be under any system,) can any one doubt, that those who have from childhood been trained to follow this direction of the Church, have read their Bible more regularly and more fully than others? and has not the Word of GOD often exerted its power even when it has been read simply as an act of duty, and when but for this direction it would not have been read at all?

The like has undoubtedly taken place even in the celebration of the Supper of our LORD. Individuals have been induced to join, and that beneficially to themselves, in the Communion even of their SAVIOUR'S Body and Blood, just so often in the year as their Church has prescribed to them. This is not so unusual a case as it might seem. One cannot doubt, that in many cases, where the Holy Communion is celebrated but three times in the year, this is so done, because such is the smallest number, of which the Church admits, and the Minister supposes that his flock would not join with him more frequently. Had the Church made no such regulation, many probably, who now partake three times a year, might not have joined even thus often; yet it would not be true to say that such persons in all cases partook without real devotion, or any love to their SAVIOUR. Again, where there are opportunities of a monthly Communion, there may be some, who would not have desired the privilege, unless the provision had been made for them, and they had been invited by the Church so to do; yet will it not of necessity follow, that they partake coldly or unacceptably. A warmer love would indeed lead the one to a more frequent, the other to a more glad Communion; nor have such persons well understood the principles of their Church; still, GOD forbid that we should judge that they had not partaken worthily and devotionally.

Here again then is protection: in each case, we have a command of GOD, obeyed in such wise as is prescribed by the Ministers, whom He has made the Stewards of His Word and Sacraments; and since in these cases we admit their regulation, why should we think it strange or incongruous, that they have given us their pious admonitions in another ordinance of God?

Nor is it to the undecided, or the timid, or the hesitating, or the notice only, that this protection is beneficial; although no reflecting Christian will speak lightly of the value of any means, which tend to strengthen the bruised reed or to kindle anew the smouldering flax. The comparison of our own times with those of the Reformers were proof enough of the benefit of authoritative interposition in these matters. Is human nature changed? or have we discovered some more royal road, by which to arrive at the subjugation of the body, the spiritualizing of the affections? or have we even from without fewer temptations to luxury and self-indulgence? or will not even the more pious and decided Christians among us confess, upon reflection, that they had probably been more chastened and lowly, more single in following hall they in this point adhered to the Ancient Discipline of the Church? Our Reformers kept and enjoined one hundred and eight days in each year, either entirely or in part, this manner sanctified: two-sevenths of each year they wished to be in some way separated by acts of self-denial and humiliation. Let any one consider what proportion of each year he has himself so consecrated, and whether, had he followed the ordinances of the Church, his spirit would not probably have been more chastened and lowly, more single in following even what he deems his duty, whether self would not have been more restrained, whether he would not have walked more humbly with his GOD.

Yet authority is a valuable support against the world, even to minds which yet are not inclined to compromise with the world unlawfully. There are many situations in life, in which it were almost impossible to continue, without observation, a system of habitual and regular Fasting, certainly not one, attended with those accompaniments, which the Fathers of our Church thought it desirable to unite with it. It is true, that every Fast may be made a Feast, and every Feast a Fast, that as far as self-denial is concerned, if there be a steadfast purpose, the object may perhaps be as well accomplished in the midst of plenty and luxury, as by the purposed spareness of a private board; it is possible also, that the acts might be in some measure concealed; still there are very many minds, and those such as one would be the most anxious to protect, to whom the very suspicion that they might be observed, would be a matter of pain and a species of profanation; they would shrink from any thing which might be construed into Pharisaic abstinence, or

which would seem to pretend to more than ordinary measures of Christian prudence. To such mild and unobtrusive spirits, the recommendation or direction of the Church is an invaluable support: they may now adopt the line of conduct which they love, unimpeded by any scruple, lest their good should be evil spoken of; they are acting under authority; they pretend to do nothing more than the Founders of their Church have deemed expedient for every one; their conduct involves no lofty pretensions; they follow in simplicity and faithfulness an old and trodden track, which has been marked out for them as plain and safe.

The first advantage then which may result from the authoritative interposition of the Church in regulating this duty, is the securing of greater regularity and more uniform perseverance in its performance; not undoubtedly as in itself an end, but as leading to great and important ends; for as those pious men, who laid so much stress thereon, themselves say, "when it respecteth a good end, it is a good work; but the end being evil, the work is also evil." "Fasting is not to be commended as a duty, but as an instrument; and, in that sense, no man can reprove it, or undervalue it, but he that knows neither spiritual acts, nor spiritual necessities."

But further, it is not even true, that all the purposes of Fasting can be attained by mere self-denial in the midst of luxury. For this acquisition of the habit of self-denial, although an important object, is by no means the sole end of Fasting. The great purpose, in connexion with which it is chiefly mentioned in Holy Scripture, is prayer. The influences of Society, rightly chosen, may dispose the mind to more fervent (possibly only more excited) prayer; it is solitude generally, or communion with a single friend, which brings us to a humble, contrite, lowly intercourse with our GOD. In the present day, the first paramount evil which destroys its tens of thousands, is probably self-indulgence; the second which hinders thousands in their progress heavenwards, is the being "busy and careful about many things," whether temporal or spiritual. "We have kept the vineyards of our mother's children; but our own vineyards we have not kept." The tendency of the age is to activity, and we have caught its spirit; if we be but active about our Master's calling, we deem ourselves secure; we think not, until we are precluded from active exertion, "how much activity belongs to some (ages and some) natures, and that this nature is often mistaken for grace." Meanwhile an activity which leads us not inwards, has taken place of that tranquil retiring meditation on the things of the unseen world which formed the deep, absorbing, contemplative, piety of our forefathers; even the conception of the joys of heaven, which very many of us form, is but a glorified transcript of our life here; we look, when through GOD'S mercy in CHRIST we shall be delivered from the burthen of the flesh, to be like the "Ministers of His who do His pleasure;" but we look not, comparatively at least, to that which our Fathers longed for, to be with CHRIST, and to see Him as He is. Our age is in general too busy, too active, for deep and continued self-observation, or for thoughtful communion with our GOD. It would not be too broad or invidious a statement to say, that for real insight into the recesses of our nature, or for deep aspirations after GOD, we must for the most part turn to holy men of other days: our own furnish us chiefly with that which they have mainly cherished, a general abhorrence of sin; they guide us not to trace it out in the lurking corners of your own hearts: they teach us to acknowledge generally the corruption of our nature, the necessity of a Redeemer, and the love we should feel towards Him; but they lead us not to that individual and detailed knowledge of our own personal sinfulness, whence the real love of our Redeemer can alone flow. A religious repose and a thoughtful contemplation would be a second advantage of complying in this respect with the instructions of our Church.

Braced and strung by retirement into ourselves, and tranquil meditation upon GOD, we should return to our active duties with so much more efficiency, as we ourselves had become holier, humbler, calmer, more abstracted from self, more habituated to refer all things to GOD. Were human activity alone engaged

on both sides, then might we the rather justify the prevailing notions of the day, that energy is to be met by counter-energy alone: but now, since " we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, I against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world," it especially behoves us too look wherein our great strength lies, and to take heed that "the weapons of our warfare be not carnal." It is tempting to adopt into the service of GOD the weapons or the mode of warfare, which in the hands of His enemies we see to be efficacious; but the faithful soldier of CHRIST must not go forth with weapons which he has not proved; the Christian's armoury, as the Apostle goes on to describe it, is mainly defensive; and when he has urged his brethren to assume it, he exhorts them to add that whereby alone it becomes effectual--a duty in which again we appear to ourselves to be inactive--"praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints." Fasting, retirement, and prayer, as they severally and unitedly tend to wean us from ourselves and cast us upon God, will tend to promote singleness of purpose, to refine our busy and over-heated restlessness into a calm and subdued confidence in Him, in whose strength we go forth. Nor shall we, until the day of Judgment, know how much of the victory was granted to those, who in man's sight took no share in the conflict; how far the "unseen strength" of Fasting, humiliation, prayer, put forth by those of whom the world took no account, was allowed by God to prevail. The world saw only that the Apostle whom they had imprisoned, escaped their power; they knew not that the prayer of the Church had baffled their design. In the present conflict throughout the world, in which the pride of human and Satanic strength seems put forth to the utmost humility and a chastened dependent spirit would seem to have an especial efficacy. On these, as the graces most opposed to the world's main sin, we might look the more cheerfully for GOD'S blessing; thus shall we at least be saved from augmenting the evil we would oppose. "Fasting directly advances towards chastity, and by consequence and indirect powers to patience, humility, and indifference. But then it is not the fast of a day that can do this; it is not an act, but a state of fasting, that operates to mortification."

A third benefit, which might be hoped to result from the more assiduous practice of this duty, would be a more self-denying extensive charity. "Fasting without mercy, is but an image of famine; Fasting without works of piety, is only an occasion of covetousness:" and an Apostolic Father gives us this excellent instruction, "A true Fast is not merely keep under the body, but to give to the widow, or the poor, the amount of that which thou wouldest have expended upon thyself; that so he who receives it may pray to GOD for thee."

It may perhaps seem strange to some that the present age should be thought wanting in self-denying charity. And yet let men but consider with themselves not what they give only, but what they retain; let them inquire a little further, not only what wants are relieved, but what remediable misery remains unabated; or let them but observe generally the glaring contrasts of extremest luxury and softness, and pinching want and penury; between their own ceiled houses, and the houses of GOD which lie waste; or let them only trace out one single item in the mass of human wretchedness, disease, insanity, religious ignorance, and picture to themselves what a Christian people might do, what the primitive Christians would have done, to relieve it,--and then turn to what is done, to what themselves do, and say whether means to promote self-denying charity can well be spared.

A further important object of the stated and frequent recurrence of the prescribed Fasts of our Church, is the public recognition of the reality of things spiritual. Here also very many have felt, (and it is a feeling whose strength is daily increasing,) that some public protest is needed against the modes of acting, tolerated (would one must not say, reigning!) in our nominally Christian land: that the Church, or the body

of believers, ought to have some recognized modes of distinguishing themselves from those, who manifest by their deeds, that although "amongst us, they are not of us;" and who, on the principles of our Church, ought to have gone out or to have been removed from us.

It has been with a right view of what the ideal of the Christian Church should be, its holiness, and its purity, although not, I must think, with a just conception of the nature of the Church, that mean jealous for the honour of their God and their REDEEMER, have in some measure formed Churches within the Church. The plan has, I think been defective, sacred and praiseworthy as was the object contemplated. It is true, that the mere union in the celebration of the weekly festival of our LORD'S Resurrection does not, as things now are, furnish a sufficient condemnation of the maxims and offences of the World; that the Church and the World are too much amalgamated; that while the light of the Church has in part penetrated the gross darkness of the World, there is yet danger, lest that light itself should be obscured.

Yet the remedy for this, under GOD'S blessing, is not to be sought in rescuing or concentrating some scattered rays of that Church, while the Church herself is abandoned to the World. Her own Ordinances afford the means of her restoration. Not to speak of those ulterior and fearful powers committed to her, (and which other Communions exercise,) of ejecting from her bosom "the wicked person," the observance of her own other institutions would virtually eject them. Not indeed at once, (as indeed GOD Himself has thought fit to allow even His own Blessed Spirit but gradually to leaven our corrupted mass,) not at once, (for at present, long continuance in opposed habits would prevent many from receiving the Ordinances of the Church,) but yet, one should trust, steadily and increasingly; the mists which now encircle the Church, would disperse, and its glorious elevation on Zion's hill would more effectually be seen.

Those, whom the easy Service of the LORD'S Day repels not, who would fain serve GOD on the seventh day, and Mammon on the remaining six, would by these severer or more continuous services, be brought to some test of what spirit they were; more frequent Communions, more constant Worship, more regular fasting, would show men, whether they belonged to the Church or to the World: and if the Church, like Him, who is its Head, and because joined to that Head, becomes a stone of stumbling, if some shall more openly fall back unto perdition, still it will have performed its office; many, one may be sure, (for our assurance rests on GOD'S Word,) would also be awakened from their lethargy of death; and if it be to some a "savour of death," it will, by GOD'S mercy, be to many more a "savour of life, unto life."

Yet the result of any system, sanctioned by GOD'S Word, belongs to us. Were the consequences of more Apostolic practice a great apparent defection and desolation, we dare not hesitate. "It must be made manifest that they are not all of us." Meanwhile a beacon will be held out by those, who would wish to see their path: the Church would, in example, as well as in her theory and directions, hold up a higher standard of performance: she, in theory the most perfect, would no longer be in proportion the least influential; the pleas, that every show of religion, which the world tolerates not, is the mere excess and badge of a party, could no longer be held: those who shrink from what might seem a voluntary or ostentatious forwardness, would no longer be deterred from uniting in observances, which, if authorized, they would love: and there might again be no separation but between those who serve GOD, and those who serve Him not.

The world has seen that its own principles are leading to its own destruction; it acknowledges that its increased laxity has fearfully increased its corruption; offences, which even it abhors, are multiplied; vices, which disturb even its peace, stalk more openly; yet while it reaps the bitter fruits of its own ways, it dares not strike the root.

The Fasts, appointed by our Church, appear eminently calculated, not in truth as a panacea of all evil, but as one decided protest against the "corruption which is in the world by lust," as one testimony to the conviction of men of the reality of things eternal.

Men may "fast for strife and to smite with the fist of wickedness," as they may also "for pretence make long prayers:" yet men will not, in general, submit to inconvenience and privation,--except for a real and substantial object: the world has easier paths for its followers; he, who suffers hardship for an unseen reward, at least gives evidence to the world of the sincerity and rootedness of his own conviction; he attests that he is a pilgrim journeying to a better country, and however men may for a while neglect his testimony, yet if it be consistent and persevering, it cannot be silenced.

Such are some of the advantages, which a recurrence to the system of our Church in respect of Fasting might, in dependence upon GOD'S blessing, tend to realize: a more uniform, namely, and regular observance of an injunction of our Blessed SAVIOUR; a deeper humiliation, and a more chastened spirit in carrying on His will; a more thorough insight into ourselves, and a closer communion with our GOD; a more resolute and consistent practice of self-denying charity; a more lively realizing of things spiritual; a warning to the world of GOD'S truth and its own peril. I have spoken with reference to prevailing habits and general character only, partly because they are these habits which the regulations of a Church must mainly contemplate; in part also, because, in whatever degree, they will probably form a portion of our own. The evil or defective character of any period is not formed by, nor will it exist in those only who are evil; it encompasses us, is within us: we also contribute in our degree to foster and promote it; nay, it is from us probably that it receives its main countenance and support. Our own standard is insensibly lowered by the evil with which we are environed. A self-indulgent age is not a favourable atmosphere for the growth of self-denial; nor an age of busy and self-dependent activity for that of a calm and abiding practical recognition, that every thing is in GOD'S hands; nor a period absorbed in the things of sense for thoughtful meditation on things eternal. The predominant evils will indeed appear in the Christian faith in a subdued form; yet whether the temptation be to an unconscious compliance with them, or unwittingly to oppose evil with evil, the danger lies nearer here than in any other part of duty. And if the salt in any wise lose its savour, wherewith shall the self-corrupting world be preserved? wherewith the salt itself be salted?

The benefits above names are such as depend on the increased degree of Fasting, exercised in compliance with the directions of the Church, independently of the consideration of the days or seasons selected for the purpose. The results to be anticipated from a more general adherence to these rules appear, however, to be heightened by that selection. The general objects of the Church were, 1. to impress upon the mind and life the memory of her SAVIOUR'S sufferings; 2. to prepare the mind for different solemn occasions, which recur in her yearly service. The first, or the Friday Fast, as above stated, was universally adopted in the early Church, and in all probability was coeval with the Apostles; it was continue uninterruptedly, alike in the Eastern and the Western Church, and preserved in our own, through the respect which she bore to primitive antiquity, and the experience of the elder Church. It was perhaps at the first adopted, as the natural expression of sorrow for the loss of their LORD and for His bitter sufferings. With this would soon connect itself, almost to the exclusion of the former, sorrow for the sins, which caused those sufferings. "We do not fast," says Chrysostom, "for the Passion or the Cross, but for our sins; --the Passion is not the occasion for fasting or mourning, but of joy and exultation.--We mourn not for that, GOD forbid, but for our sins, and therefore we fast." As then the LORD'S day was the weekly festival of their SAVIOUR'S resurrection a weekly memorial of our rising again, in Him and through Him, to a new and real life; so was the Friday's Fast a weekly memorial of the death to sin, which

all Christians had in their SAVIOUR died, and which, if they would live with Him, they must continually die. Thus each revolving week was a sort of representation of that great week, in which man's redemption was completed: the Church never lost sight of her SAVIOUR'S sufferings; each week was hallowed by a return of the "Good Friday." One need scarcely insist upon the tendency of such a system, deeply to impress on men's hearts the doctrine of the Atonement, by thus incorporating it into their ordinary lives, and making them by their actions confess the truth, In the early Church its efficacy was without doubt increased by the accession of the Fast of Wednesday, or fourth day of the week; so that no portion of the week was without some memorial of the SAVIOUR of the Church. There is however another object, which, although not originally contemplated, was in fact attained by this institution, the holier celebration, namely, of our most solemn day, that our SAVIOUR'S death. Most Christians, probably, who have endeavoured to realize to themselves the events of that day, have been painfully disappointed in so doing; instead of

Touching the heart with softer power

For comfort than an angel's mirth

it has been to them an oppressive day: its tremendous truths overwhelmed rather than consoled; it was so unlike all other days, that the mind was confounded by its very greatness: it seem unnatural to do any thing, which one would do even on any other holy day, and the heart was equally unsatisfied with what it did or did not do. Something of this kind has taken place in very many minds; and the reason probably was, that the solemnity of that day was too insulated; that (if one may use the expression) it was out of keeping with the religious habits of the rest of the year.

This then the weekly Fast and solemn recollection recommended by the Church are calculated to remedy; as indeed, had they been observed, these feelings would never have found place. In whatever degree its advice is adhered to, Good Friday becomes a day of more chastened, and yet of intenser feeling; it is connected with a train of the like emotions, affections, and resolves; insulated no longer, but the holiest only among the holy. "Neither in moral or religious, more than in physical and civil matters," says a very acute observer of human nature, "do people willingly do any thing suddenly or upon the instant; they need a succession of the like actions, whereby a habit may be formed; the things which they are to love, or to perform, they cannot conceive as insulated and detached; whatever we are to repeat with satisfaction, must not have become foreign to us."

The principle is of important application in the whole range of our duties; nor could it be too often repeated, in warning, "that what is not practised frequently, can never be performed with delight." We are sensible of the value of habits in moral action, and are not surprised that one who make only desultory efforts should never succeed in acquiring any habit; we feel it in some degree in our public worship of GOD, and think it natural that one who does not diligently avail himself of all his opportunities of attending it, should join in it but coldly and lifelessly; it is strange to him, and therefore at best a stiff and austere service; and yet, in other matters, we act in defiance of this maxim; we have allowed our Fasts to become rare, and therefore it has come to pass, that so many never fast at all: our holy days have passed for the most part into neglect, and therefore the few that remain excite but little comparative feeling; our daily service is well nigh disused, and therefore our weekly is so much neglected; we have diminished the frequency of our communions, and therefore so many are stranger to the LORD'S Table, so many formal partakers.

Not so the Apostles, nor the Primitive Church, nor our own in its Principles, or in its most Apostolic days: they knew human nature better; or, rather, acting from their own experience and self-knowledge, they

ordained what was healthful for men of like nature with themselves; what was a duty in any period of the year, must needs be performed throughout; each portion had its Festivals and its Fasts, and the varying circle formed one harmonious whole of Christian humiliation and Christian joy.

The Church was in those days consistent; its ministers derived their commission not of man, but of GOD, who called them inwardly by His Spirit, and outwardly through those to whom, though His Apostles, He had delegated this high office. The admission into Holy Orders was no mere outward consecration or ceremony, but an imparting of GOD'S Spirit to those who were separated to this work, through the prayers of the congregation, and the delegated authority of the Bishop. Christian edification was not left to each man's private judgment, but each was taught by those who had authority and experience, what was good and expedient for his soul's health. We also have been in these days becoming consistent; if we fast, we fast for ourselves; if we keep a holy day, or select a portion of the weekly service, it is because we of our own minds deem it convenient; we have become in all things the judges of the Church, instead of reverently obeying what has been recommended to us; we judge beforehand what will be useful to us, instead of ascertaining by experience whether the system recommended by elder Christians be not so.

Yet I would fain hope that there will not long be this variance between our principles and our practice; but that, instead of examining what is the present practice of any portion of our Church, and inquiring how this may be amended, men would first investigate, in the Canons and the Rubrics, what the real mind of the Church is, and see whether adherence to these would not remove this regretted fact.

One only objection can, I think, be raised by any earnest-minded Christian to this weekly fast, namely, that the means employed, mere self-denial in so slight a matter as one's food, is so petty and trifling a thing, that it were degrading the doctrine of the Cross to make such an observance in any way bear upon it. One respects the feelings of such a person and his love for the Cross; but the objection probably proceeds from inexperience in the habit of Fasting. For let any one consider, from his childhood upwards, by what the greater part of his habits have been formed, and by what they are continued: not by any great acts or great sacrifices, (as far as any thing might be relatively great,) but by a succession of petty actions, whose effect he could not at any time foresee, or thought too minute to leave any trace behind them, and which have in fact, whether for good or for evil, made him what he is.

Practice will universally show, that the motive ennobles the action, not that the action dishonours the motive. "True it is," says Bishop Taylor, "that religion snatches even at little things; and as it teaches us to observe all the great commandments and significations of duty, so it is not willing to pretermitt any thing, which, although by its greatness it cannot of itself be considerable, yet by its smallness it may become a testimony of the greatness of the affection, which would not omit the least minutes of love and duty."

He who pronounced a blessing upon the gift of a cup of cold water to a disciple in His name, will also bless any act of sincere self-denial practised in memory of Him. Only let us not mock GOD, let us deny ourselves in something which is to us really self-denial; let us, in whatever degree we may be able to bear it without diminishing our own usefulness, put ourselves to some inconvenience, in sorrow and shame for those sins, "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life," which made our SAVIOUR a man of sorrows, and exposed Him to shame, and we shall not afterwards think the practice degrading to Him, or without meaning.

The Fast of the early Christians during Lent was an entire abstinence until evening, on the Wednesday and Friday, until three o'clock: unused as we for the most part are to any such discipline, many of us

would at the first not be well able to endure it; the difference also of climate might render that degree of abstinence oppressive to us, which in more southern altitude would recruit only and refresh the spirit: the weak and sickly again have always been exempt from those more rigid abstinences: they might not beneficially be able to deprive themselves of an early or an entire meal: yet doubtless many of them will have been enabled to trace in themselves the evils of even a necessary softness and indulgence of the body; and the mind which shall have become alive to these, will not be slow in discovering some mode of "keeping under the body, and bringing it into subjection."

The early Church, besides its more rigid Fasts, admitted also of the substitution of less palatable and diminished nourishment; and our own has, in insulated directions accompanying her occasional Fasts, recognized the same principle: in general, she has left the mode of observing her Fasts free to the conscience of each; only let them consist in real self-denial, and be accompanied by charity, retirement, and prayer.

The early Church acted, as it supposed, upon our Blessed SAVIOUR'S own authority, in connecting these acts of bodily abstinence with the memory of His death. The Bridegroom was taken away! Yet if anyone should find in himself any abiding repugnance to associate matters, necessarily humiliating, with the doctrine of the Cross, let him not endeavour to force his feelings: the Church wished to lay no yoke upon her members; let him perform the acts in mere compliance with the advice of the Church, and the experience of elder Christians: when we shall have attained the habit of self-denial and self-humiliation, the doctrine of the Cross will, without effort, connect itself with each such performance.

The other Fasts of the Church require the less to be dwelt upon, either because, as in Lent, her authority is yet in some degree recognized, although it be very imperfectly and capriciously obeyed; or, as in the case of the Ember Weeks, the practice has direct scriptural authority; or in that of the other Festivals, because when we shall again value the privilege of having the blessed examples of Martyrs and Saints set before us, to

Remind us, how our darksome clay

May keep the ethereal warmth our new Creator brought,

we shall feel also the advantage of ushering in each such day by actions which may impress upon us how they entered into their glory, by taking up their SAVIOUR'S cross and following Him.

Only with regard to the Ember Weeks, it may be permitted to observe, how this institution yet more fully embraces the objects which some good men are endeavouring, by voluntary association, to attain. For the solemn period of the four Ember Weeks is obviously calculated for prayer, not for those only who are to be ordained to any holy function, but for all who shall have been so called, that GOD "would so replenish them with the truth of His doctrine, and endue them with innocency of life, that they may faithfully serve Him;" and thus, not only some few individuals, more nearly known to each other, but all the Ministers and all the people of CHRIST should, with one mind and one mouth, implore a blessing upon the Ministry which He has appointed.

And this also is an especial privilege of the whole system of regular Fasting prescribed by our Church, beyond the voluntary discipline adopted by individuals, that it presents the whole Church unitedly before GOD, humbling themselves for their past sins, and imploring Him not to give His heritage to reproach. The value of this united prayer and humiliation only GOD knoweth; yet since He hath promised to be present

where two or three are gathered together in His name, how much more when His Church shall again unite before Him "in weeping, fasting, and praying;" how much more shall He spare, though we deserve punishment, and in His wrath think upon mercy. He who spared the Ninevites, how much more may we trust that He will spare us, for whom He has given his well-beloved SON.

"LET us, therefore, dearly beloved, seeing there are many more causes of fasting and mourning in these our days, than hath been of many years heretofore in one age, endeavour ourselves both inwardly in our hearts, and also outwardly with our bodies, diligently to exercise this godly exercise of fasting, in such sort and manner, as the holy prophets, the apostles, and divers other devout persons for their time used the same. GOD is now the same GOD as He was then; GOD that loveth righteousness, and that hateth iniquity; GOD which willeth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he turn from his wickedness and live; GOD that hath promised to turn to us, if we refuse not to turn to Him: yea, if we turn our evil works from before His eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do well, seek to do right, relieve the oppressed, be a right judge to the fatherless, defend the widow, break our bread to the hungry, bring the poor that wander into our house, clothe the naked, and despise not our brother which is our own flesh: Then shalt thou call, saith the prophet, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and He shall say, Here am I: yea, GOD, which heard Ahab, and the Ninevites, and spared them, will also hear our prayers, and spare us, so that we, after their example, will unfeignedly turn unto Him: yea, He will bless us with His heavenly benedictions, the time that we have to tarry in this world, and, after the race of this mortal life, He will bring us to His heavenly kingdom, where we shall reign in everlasting blessedness with our SAVIOUR CHRIST, to whom with the FATHER and the HOLY GHOST be all honour and glory, for ever and ever. Amen." Homily on Fasting, part 2.

"LORD, have mercy upon us, and give us grace, that while we live in this miserable world, we may through thy help bring forth this and such other fruits of the SPIRIT, commended and commanded in thy holy word, to the glory of thy name, and to our comforts, that after the race of this wretched life, we may live everlastingly with thee in thy heavenly kingdom, not for the merits and worthiness of our works, but for thy mercies' sake, and the merits of thy dear Son, JESUS CHRIST, to whom, with thee and the HOLY GHOST, be all laud, honour, and glory, for ever and ever. men." Homily on Fasting, part 1.

#### POSTSCRIPT.

IN the preceding remarks, the observance of the Fasts enjoined by the Church has been recommended on the ground of the practical wisdom and spiritual experience of the Holy Men, by whose advice they were adopted, rather than on that of the direct authority of the Church. And this has been done, not because the writer doubted of the validity of that authority in this instance, but because it involved a question, which would to many appear distant and abstract; whether, namely, the Church's Laws on this subject were by long disuse virtually abrogated. For I am persuaded that many excellent men, who would shrink from contravening a distinct command of their Church, do in fact neglect these, from some notion that the Church herself has tacitly abandoned them. This notion does indeed appear to me to rest on a wrong supposition.

For, 1st. Since the Church has not annexed any censures to the neglect of this Ordinance, (which may correspond to the penal provisions of a civil law,) the mere silence of the Church, or of her Spiritual Authorities, is no proof of her acquiescence in the breach of her directions.

2. It would be admitted in any other case, that the mere multitude of those who broke any law did not alone abrogate that law; that the intrinsic sanctity of the law cannot depend upon the obedience which men may yield to it; that the laxity or remissness of men, at one period, cannot annihilate the authority by which that remissness was to be controlled. The disobedience of others, be they many or few, nay, though they should be even the majority, can have no force in absolving us from the law by which we are in common bound. It is true that observances, which the Church has at one time on her own authority ordained, she may at another abrogate; yet, until she do this, it is to be presumed that she wishes them to be retained in force. And it has already happened, that ordinances have for a time fallen into disuse, which yet were never allowed to be abrogated, and which afterwards have been very beneficially revived. It is within the memory of man, that the yearly Commemoration of our Blessed SAVIOUR'S death was in country congregations very generally omitted. This solemn day is now, I trust, almost universally observed; nor is there any apparent reason, why this other ordinance of the Church, whereby we humble ourselves for the sins which caused that Death, should not, if men once came seriously to consider it, be promptly, and with very wholesome results, restored. I doubt not that if the question were formally proposed to the Spiritual Authorities of our Church, whether they would think it advisable that our stated Fasts should be abolished, they would earnestly deprecate it. Their silence therefore on this subject is rather to be ascribed to the supposed hopelessness of attempting to bend our modern manners to Ancient Discipline, than to any disparagement of the institutions themselves. Our institutions in many cases sleep, but are not dead; nay, one has reason to hope that, although the many neglect them, a faithful few have ever been found, who have experienced and could testify the value of those which the world seems most entirely to neglect.

One might refer, in proof, to the practice of a daughter Church, the Episcopal Church of the United States. Sprung from our Church and supplied by her with Ministers, until the State was separated from us, they carried with them her principles, as they had been modified by the habits and feelings and practice of the period which had elapsed since her Reformation. She may be regarded then as representing the then state of opinions amongst us. Yet formerly re-considering the subject of the Church'S Fasts, they omitted only the Vigils; while they retained the weekly Friday Fast, those of Lent, the Ember and Rogation days, as days "on which the Church requires such a measure of abstinence, as is more especially suited to extraordinary acts and exercises of Devotion."

Yet, although these grounds of Church authority appear to myself perfectly valid, and I doubt not that many others will feel their weight, as soon as they shall reflect upon them, the other argument, drawn from the practical wisdom and experience of the enactors of these regulations, seems to lie nearer to men'S consciences. The argument lies in a narrow compass. Regular and stated Fasts formed a part of the Discipline by which, during almost the whole period since the Christian Church has been founded, all her real sons, in every climate, nation, and language, have subdued the flesh to the spirit, and brought both body and mind into a willing obedience to the Law of GOD. They thought this Discipline necessary as an expression and instrument of repentance, as a memorial of their SAVIOUR, to "refrain their souls and keep them low," to teach them to "trust in the LORD," and seek communion with Him. To this system our own Church during all her happier times adhered. The value of this remedy for sin has come to us attested by the experience, and sealed by the blood, of Martyrs; who having learnt thus to endure hardships, like good soldiers of CHRIST, at last resisted to the blood, striving against sin. Shall we, untried, pronounce that to be needless for our selves, which the Glorious Company of the Apostles, the Goodly Fellowship of Prophets, the noble army of Martyrs, the Holy Church throughout the world, found needful?

I can hardly anticipate other than one answer. Only let not any one be deterred by the irksomeness, or perplexities, or harassing doubts, which every one must find in resuming a neglected portion of duty. It were scarcely a discipline, if its practice brought with it an immediate reward; and we have besides to pay the penalty of our sloth and diseased habits. "Patiently to lack what flesh and blood doth desire, and by virtue to forbear what by nature we covet, this no man attaineth unto, but with labour and long practice." And if it be that blessed instrument of holiness, which they who have tried it assure us, it will not be without some struggle with our spiritual enemy, that we shall recover the ground which we have lost. Only let us persevere, not elated with the first petty victories over ourselves, which may be perhaps conceded to us in order to produce over-confidence and carelessness; nor dejected by the obstacles which a luxurious and scoffing age may oppose; nor by the yet greater difficulties from within, in acquiring any uniform or consistent habit. Men, aided by GOD, have done the like; and for us also, His grace will be sufficient.

OXFORD,

The Feast of St. Thomas.

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