

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In the Light of Scripture

by

F. C. H. Dreyer and E. Weller

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

FASTING

THE PRACTICE OF REGULAR FASTING in the Christian church dates back to the end of the second century before the papacy was established. A weekly fast was observed then, but it was wholly voluntary and was not associated with earning merit. Later, fasts before Easter and Ascension Day were introduced, the length of time varying in different localities. In some countries it was only for forty hours, to correspond with the time our Lord's body lay in the grave. In others it continued for forty days in remembrance of the fasts of Moses (Exodus 24:18; 34:28), Elijah (I Kings 19:8), and the Lord Jesus (Matthew 4:2).

Still later, sundry bishops appointed additional fasts for special purposes, ordering that the money saved should be used for charitable purposes. By the sixth century fasting was a recognized part of religious life, and in the eighth it had become a deed of merit, while non-observance of appointed days was regarded as a great sin, to be confessed and atoned for by severe penance.

The Roman Church divides the days of the year into three categories.

1. The Great Fasts. The most notable of these is Lent, which begins on the Wednesday of the seventh week before Easter. The requisite forty days of this fast include the four days of the first week of Lent, and the six days of each of the six following weeks.

There are also various seasonal fasts, during which a midday meal may be taken, but in the morning and evening food must be eaten sparingly, with no meat. In some places eggs, milk, and cheese are also forbidden, but not in others. No food whatsoever must pass the lips after midnight of the day before Holy Communion is taken. This regulation has recently been modified by papal decree for those who are sick.

2. The Lesser Fasts. These comprise the Sundays during Lent, the three days before Ascension, and all Fridays except those in Lent. Three meals are permitted on these days, but meat is prohibited.

3. Ordinary Days, wherein people can eat as they desire.

Luke 5:35 is quoted in support of fasting, but an examination of the passage shows that it does not apply to such fasting as Rome prescribes.

But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.

The Pharisees had asked the Lord Jesus why His disciples did not fast as did theirs and John's. Answering them, He used the illustration of the friends of the bridegroom rejoicing while the bridegroom was with them at the wedding, Jesus being the bridegroom and His disciples the guests. Then said He, "**The days will come when the Bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.**"

He was referring to His coming death, and spoke of it again to His disciples in the upper room:

Ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice; and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy . . . Ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you (John 16:20, 22).

The weeping was fulfilled at His crucifixion, but the joy that no man could take from them began when He arose from the dead.

Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord (John 20:20).

The keynote of the Christian life is not sorrow but joy, not fasting but feasting. Even in the Old Testament God did not ordain fasts, though on the Day of Atonement they were commanded to afflict their souls (Leviticus 16:29) because on that one day of the year all their sins were brought into remembrance and confessed to God. Fasting has a place in connection with prayer in times of special need, when we humble ourselves before God, and we find many occasions when it was so observed, but it was not ordained as a regular religious practice.

In Samuel's day, the people of Israel after a long time of backsliding lamented before the Lord. They came together and drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted, and said, "**We have sinned against the Lord**" (I Samuel 7:6).

The king of Nineveh commanded his people to fast and cry mightily to God, if perchance God would turn away His fierce anger from them, but they also had to turn from their evil ways and from the violence that was in their hands (Jonah 3:7, 8). God did turn away His wrath, but it was their repentance of which the sackcloth and fasting were but a sign, which made this possible. Twice we find Daniel praying and fasting (Daniel 9:3; 10:1-3). Esther also fasted and called upon her fellow countrymen to do so, when all their lives hung in the balance, and God heard their cry (Esther 4:16).

Ezra, facing the long and hazardous journey back to Jerusalem from Babylon (Ezra 8:21-23), and Nehemiah, when he heard of the ruined state of Jerusalem and desired to rebuild the city (Nehemiah 1:4) fasted and prayed.

The Lord Jesus appointed no set fast days for His people in New Testament times, but twice we find the Apostle Paul fasting. With other leaders at Antioch, burdened concerning the lost condition of the world around them, when God sent two of their number on their first great missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas fasted and prayed. He fasted again when in peril in the storm on the journey to Rome (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23; 27:21). In all of these instances the fasting was spontaneous under a deep sense of need. These fasts, though not commanded, found acceptance before God, not as works of merit, but as the expression of earnest desire. The Jews of later Old Testament times appointed their own regular fast days in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months, in commemoration of national disasters, and kept them for seventy years (Zechariah 7:5). They wondered that God gave no answer. But God gave them an answer by the mouth of the prophet:

Did ye at all fast unto me, even to me? . . . Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and show mercy and compassions every man to his brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart (Zechariah 7:5, 9, 10).

This was a repetition of His word years before which they had refused to heed, and all their fasting was in vain.

Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labors. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? . . . Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? (Isaiah 58:3-6).

The same thing happened in our Lord's day, He rebuked the Pharisees for their hypocrisy:

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward (Matthew 6:16).

They sought the praise of men and they got it, but that was all they had. Fasting is not something imposed from without by church authority, but comes from within. If it is not an expression of abhorrence of sin, and a hunger for the grace of God, then it means nothing. Why should there be sin in eating meat and no sin in eating fish?

For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving; For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer (I Timothy 4: 4, 5).

In the previous verse (I Timothy 4:3) the apostle denounces as a doctrine of devils this “commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.”

To those who have been delivered by faith from the bondage of vain tradition, Paul says:

Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honor to the satisfying of the flesh (Colossians 2:20-23).

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage (Galatians 5:1).

~ end of chapter 33 ~

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