

## FASTING AS A HEALTH FACTOR.

[By H. T. WHITFORD, in the "Church Eclectic."]

[CONTINUED.]

It should be mentioned that, in contradistinction to this definition, an erastian temper of mind is shown by many who insist upon the fast day beginning and ending at midnight because the civil day is so reckoned. Surely it is wiser to stick to the Bible method of counting the ecclesiastical day from evening to evening, and the fasting from morning to night, as the homily states. It could hardly be otherwise for if the fast begins and ends at midnight there could be no interval for food on occasions when a number of fast days come together. The same temper of mind may be seen in the rule which permits food immediately before a midnight Communion, and yet it is reckoned to be fasting Communion! <sup>a</sup> Furthermore, in advocating the right use of the appointed fasts, we must not overlook the set feasts. That devotion which converts the feast of Sunday into a rigorous fast cannot be said to be founded on humility or obedience, for such an act evidently is the result of private judgment and is a direct violation of the law of the Catholic Church. <sup>b</sup>

Some may say that fasting comparatively speaking, is quite an easy matter if we do not impose upon ourselves any other rule than is strictly implied by the definition quoted in the homily. That in fact, to continue all the day without food or drink from morning until night, providing breakfast is permitted and another meal is allowed at the close of the day, is a practice of every day occurrence with many whose occupations prevent a mid-day meal. Whilst this is admitted, still the majority of people will feel the deprivation of food for say ten consecutive hours during the working day to be a real act of self-denial, and few will willingly impose upon themselves such a period of total abstinence unless it can be proved to be (1) beneficial to bodily health in accordance with the law of nature; and (2) imposed upon man as a positive duty in accordance with the revelation of God's Will.

In estimating the physical benefit of fasting, we may look for advantage in two directions, preventive and curative. The old adage 'prevention is better than cure' manifestly finds its most legitimate application with reference to the law of health. It is a matter of common experience to note how much easier it is to escape the effects of disease by using precautionary measures, so as to be able to meet the first attacks, than the opposite course of waiting until the enemy makes a breach through the wall where it finds the least power of resistance. When a man discovers through a pain in the part attacked that disease has taken hold of him, his first thought is to call in the aid of his family doctor with the view of taking such an antidote or palliatives as he may prescribe. How much easier it would have been in many cases for the patient to have used preventive means instead of palliatives will readily be admitted by every intelligent physician. Yet it is astonishing to notice how few there are in this age of scientific knowledge who are more apt to pay attention to the proper regulation of their diet and the law of rest as preventive measures than they are willing to swallow any amount of nauseating drugs after the sickness has set in. It has truly been observed that to tell the average man 'frankly that he eats and drinks too much, or walks too little, and that moderate attention to diet and exercise is the only possible

offering to be laid at the shrine of Dame Nature, is to pursue a method calculated to produce keen offence, and a general contempt for further instruction. Again, it would be much wiser to submit to a skilled diagnosis while the body is perfectly sound than to waste time and money in some not too efficacious a system of local repair when abnormal influences have been allowed their full swing. <sup>c</sup> The immediate effect of such an act of self-discipline would indicate the parts where specific disease is most likely to occur, if happily it does not prove that a definite germ has already found a local habitation and commenced its ravages. "Three-fourths of the ailments which afflict the body (said the Dean of Rochester) result from eating and drinking, yet when common sense and Christianity both say to us 'Prevention is better than cure,' we profess to assent, but in act deny it. Reason and religion tells us that moderation, self-denial, abstinence, are good both for body and soul, but we still have nothing to do with them until a surfeit or a sickness takes away the appetite, or the doctor threatens and alarms." <sup>d</sup>

The change in the vital forces which results from making one day a fast and the next day a feast, or varying it by a succession of fast days, produces a revolution in the whole system. The perfect regularity of function is interrupted by the sudden change of fast into feast, and the organs of digestion which have been at rest, on being called suddenly to perform their duty on the introduction of food, are found to be wanting in alertness, and give evidence that they feel the test. Out of weakness there comes strength. Nature must first feel the effect of want, and then she will cultivate the needful supply. Thus fasting gives scope for the acquisition of fresh energy by causing a change which brings about an alteration of vital action. The organism which receives three or four meals regularly every day all the year round becomes so accustomed to it that the function of digestion is like clock work. Still the perfect regularity—especially if an enormous proportion of the vital force is expended in the performance of this one work—is certain to end with fatal effects. The rest from active work which nature needs for repairs cannot be denied without evil results. There is no escape so long as the human engine is a slave to appetite—driven to death, when, owing to perpetual motion at high pressure, and neglect of all natural stopping places, no time is allowed to examine the working parts and see that all is safe.

The historical student cannot fail to acknowledge the wide difference—the great gulf—between the asceticism which marked the early and middle ages, and the habits of the people now-a-days. It is an ascertained fact that the danger was not in the practice of early times, but in the habits of the people of this enlightened and luxurious age. "When we know how little food is really required to sustain life we may the more readily surmise how very much more food is taken by most persons than can ever be applied usefully towards sustenance. I have (writes Dr. Richardson) no compunction in expressing that, whilst fasting enthusiasts are subjecting themselves to considerable danger from abstinence, hundreds of thousands of persons are subjecting themselves to a slower but equal danger from excesses of foods and drinks. These keep up their experiment, and with every vessel in their bodies strained to repletion and seriously overtaxed, continue to replete and strain the more." <sup>e</sup>

<sup>c</sup> *The Morning Post*, Oct. 4, 1889.

<sup>d</sup> Speech by Canon Hole, reported in *The Guardian*, Dec. 27, 1883.

<sup>e</sup> "Lessons from the Fasting Mania," by Dr. W. B. Richardson, in *The Asclepiad*, Dec., 1890, p. 328.

There is plenty of room for the adjustment of the law of moderation between the practice of a professional faster, who starves for fifty days on water alone if he be not aided by some drug, and that of a good feeder who never knew what it is to go a single day since his birth without three or four meals. At what point will science draw the line? There is a vast difference between a few hours and fifty days. Of this much we may easily be convinced; there can be no harm in adopting the historical rule as defined by the Church; viz.: Give the stomach rest once a week at least, by abstaining from food and drink from morning till night. The true and literal observance of Friday and Sunday seems to involve rest as a principle common to both. History proves the vital need of a weekly day of rest from toil, and nature indicates that rest from physical labor alone is not sufficient, there is a positive need for a weekly fast as well. For, as has been truly observed, "The practice followed by some of fasting one day in the week is no mere ecclesiastical regulation, but is founded on physiological laws." <sup>f</sup>

Whether the duration of the necessary fast be long or short, when science has ascertained the law and defined its limitations—the happy mean—what a triumph it would be were we able to witness a single living instance of a devotee to the true law of health, who, for say 120 years had practiced the rule, and still maintained full vigor of mind and body, and whose natural force had not abated nor eye dimmed by old age such as we are told was the case with Moses.

A few years ago an old lady related her experience somewhat in this fashion: "I am indeed blessed with remarkable strength and vigor for an old person. How old do you suppose I am? Well, I go with the year. I was born in the last year of the last century, and have had little or no illness throughout my whole life. I attribute the soundness of my health to the way I have been in the habit of living. I have lived well and generously, and whenever I have felt out of sorts, instead of physic, I did a bit of fasting, not by change of diet or going with less food, but by going without altogether, sometimes for 24 hours, and that always set me to rights again."

The improvement and preservation of health, and the extension of the life which now is—thus undoing the effects of the fall, and fasting as a health factor, is assumed to be of primary importance in each stage,—must ever be recognized as a matter of vital importance, for the question may still be asked, "What will a man give in exchange for his life?" "The care of the body is absolutely essential to long life and continued usefulness. He who lives by his intellect must take care of his stomach. Eating too much is as conducive to shortening life as drinking too much, and our friends the teetotalers would do well to wage war against both in their well meant crusade, for beyond a certain amount . . . excess of food is a slow poison, and induces disease of the liver and kidneys as surely as excess of alcohol does." <sup>g</sup>

<sup>f</sup> "The Virtue of Fasting," by Rev. Harvey Jones, in *Sunday Magazine*, May, 1891, p. 543.

<sup>g</sup> "Living to Eat and Eating to Live," by Dr. N. E. Yorke Davies, in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, May, 1891, p. 519-521.

"CHRIST JESUS gave Himself a ransom" (that is, a redemption price,) for all. Jesus crucified offers the price which buys our bondage. Jesus crucified effects an atonement which restores to us the friendship of the Holy God. Jesus crucified makes Himself a propitiatory Victim to expiate our sins. The redemption price which He paid, the act which perfected the reconciliation, the sacrifice which expiates the guilt, is the free offering of His most precious life to agony and to death.—*Liddon*.

<sup>a</sup> See Merati's Notes on Gavanti.

<sup>b</sup> St. Augustine considered it "no small scandal to fast on the Lord's Day," Ep. 119, ad Januar, Cap. 15.