

(From the U. S. Catholic Miscellany)

THE CHURCH OF NATURE AND OF GRACE.

The divine character of the Catholic Church, so fully evinced in the wisdom and perfection of the doctrines taught by her authority, and in their admirable adaptation to the capacity, the nature, and the wants of fallen man, is perhaps no less strikingly illustrated, in the many external rites and ceremonies she adopts, to render to God the worship he requires, and in the various offices and means she employs, to conduct the sinner to repentance and to aid the soul in its progress to perfection. In her doctrine and her discipline, she exhibits a consistency and agreement, an order and harmony, which may be looked for in vain among all mere human institutions, the observation of which alone, should lead the intelligent mind to admit her divine origin and office. Whether we regard her in her solemn fasts or her glorious festivals, we shall equally perceive how deeply her foundations are laid in the nature of man, and how in the exercise of a wisdom more than human, she touches the springs of life, recalls the heart from its perverse wanderings and forgetfulness, to higher and holier thoughts, and a nobler ambition, to the love of virtue and of God. He who does not know, who has never felt, how much the better part of man (the immortal spirit destined to survive this transitory scene) is weighed down and smothered as it were, by the affections of the body, how sensibly impaired in her highest efforts, by this dragging weight of earth, has yet to learn the real dignity of his nature, and to appreciate the high destiny of his creation.

Who does not recognise in the mysterious combination of soul and body which constitutes our nature, how great is the danger that the animal or baser part, without great struggles, to prevent it, attain the mastery over the intellectual or spiritual and better part of man. Amid all the seductions with which our senses are addressed, and the great and increasing tendencies of the age, to luxury and sensual gratifications, what generous mind, anxious for improvement, has not felt the absolute necessity by self-denial, and abstinence, to aid the soul in its unequal warfare against the flesh, and if possible, to obtain for her a substantial and permanent victory.

Hence, from the earliest period, *fasting and abstinence*, have been regarded as among the most powerful means of elevating the soul to the love of virtue and of God, and of giving it renewed strength and vigor, for its upward flight, to happiness and heaven. But how few among the numberless children of men, are capable of the high resolution, by self-imposed restraints, thus to aid

the soul in its strife against the body, however they may admire the theory of self-denial and admit the necessity of its practice to great attainments.

Hence the necessity of calling in the aid of religion, that by its sanctions, what is so admirable in itself, may be made a duty of specific obligation to the Christian, and regulated and enforced in practice, both as to time and manner, by the high authority of the Church of Christ. If under the Jewish dispensation, the advantages of fasting and abstinence were everywhere and abundantly recognised and the times and occasions for the practice of them solemnly and specially enjoined upon the chosen people of God, we find them no less strongly recommended in the Gospel of *Jesus*, and illustrated in the lives and practices of his disciples and the authorised teachers and expounders of the Word of God. See Mark ch. 9, v. 28. Matt. ch. 9, v. 15. Mark, ch. 2, v. 20. Luke, ch. 5, v. 35. Acts, ch. 13, v. 3, ch. 14 v. 22. 2 Cor. ch. 6, v. 5. ch. 11, v. 27.

From the earliest records of the Church, in the primitive days of fervor and of faith, and thence through every successive period of her existence, including what have been so erroneously called the dark ages of her history; the excellence and the obligation of *fasting*, have ever been acknowledged and its practice most solemnly enjoined, while the uninterrupted succession of holy men and women in all ages, has furnished the most illustrious examples of its efficacy as a means of purifying and elevating the soul of man. It was reserved for a comparatively recent period, when so many novelties were broached by the preachers of a new gospel, to find a shorter and easier path to heaven, in which, among many other wonderful discoveries, it was perceived, that fasting was not only unwarranted and unnecessary, but superstitious and hurtful. This was a doctrine too congenial to many, not to find numerous converts and zealous supporters, and from that day to this, among the numerous sects who date their birth from this memorable era, no common feature is more strongly marked than their condemnation and disuse of fasting, as well as their general distaste to the great duty of self-denial so characteristic of the christianity preached and inculcated by the Saviour of mankind. Thus in the spirit of a progressive declivity from the great landmarks of the true faith and the practices of piety, even those holy days, consecrated to the memory of the sufferings of *Jesus*, by fasting and prayer, and the beautiful and affecting ceremonials of the Church, have been gradually forgotten, until it is no longer considered a reproach in this enlightened age, for a professed disciple of Christ to be ignorant of the existence of