

THE CATHOLIC.

QUOD SEMPER, QUOD UBIQUE, QUOD AB OMNIBUS CREDITUM EST.—WHAT ALWAYS, AND EVERY WHERE, AND BY ALL IS BELIEVED.

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THE CATHOLIC

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A SHORT TREATISE ON FASTING.

Is fasting a vain superstition of the Church of Rome, or is it one of those Scriptural practices which no man can safely neglect? I am of the latter opinion, and I feel confident that any one who has paid that moderate degree of attention to Scripture which I have paid, will be compelled to acknowledge that, after the merits of Christ, Fasting is pointed out by Heaven as one of the best advocates which the sinner can bring along with him, when he approaches the throne of mercy, whether he comes to implore the forgiveness of his sins or to solicit aid in the hour of distress. Nay, he will be forced to acknowledge that, generally speaking, it is a necessary condition for ensuring even the advocacy of the merits of Christ.

I know that I have to deal with men who admit no evidence, which is not deducted from the written word; but to the law and to the prophets let them appeal, and there I am ready to meet them.

1. Where is the individual sinner encouraged to seek, and where is he assured that he shall find, forgiveness? In Fasting, joined with prayer, from which it should never be separated.

Achab was a murderer, a robber, an idolater, nay, an apostate to idolatry, who had scandalized the people of God and led them into idolatry. In fine, the testimony borne to his character by the Holy Ghost, is that "There was not such another for wickedness in the sight of the Lord." So that the almighty had determined to make a public example of him, and to extirpate him and his noble race from the face of the earth. "But it came to pass that, when Achab heard these words (the sentence of Heaven announced to him by the prophet Elias), he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and Fasted, and lay in sackcloth." These are the means, by which Achab, guided by the Spirit of God, sought to avert the wrath of heaven: and see the effect. "The word of the Lord came again to Elias the Thesbite, saying: Seest thou how Achab humbleth himself before me? Because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house." (1 Kings, xxi.) Is it then a vain superstition which thus wrests the shafts of vengeance out of the hands of an angry God?

In like manner David stood charged in the sight of the Lord with the two most mortal crimes that a man can commit: he stood charged with the crimes of murder and adultery. And what was the sacrifice which he offered in atonement for these crimes? It was that of Fasting. "I humbled my soul with Fasting. When I wept and chastised my soul with Fasting, that was to my reproach, . . . My knees are weak through Fasting and my flesh faileth of fatness." (Psalm xxxv. and lxi.)

It would appear, that there were men who scoffed at Fasting in David's days as well as in ours, yet through

Fasting David sought mercy, and through Fasting he found mercy. Do we despise mercy, or have we found an easier and more effectual way of ensuring it?

The Lord was with Josaphat because he walked in the first ways of David, his father (viz., the ways in which David walked, when the Lord said of him, that he was a man according to his own heart). But afterwards Josaphat enkindled the wrath of heaven against himself, and his kingdom by espousing the cause of Achab, the impious king of Israel. To punish this crime the Lord brought the Ammonites and Moabites, in conjunction with the Syrians, to overwhelm him and his people. But Josaphat being seized with fear, betook himself wholly to pray to the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast of all Juda. (2 Chron., xx.) The result of the fast was, that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel, and bid him say, "Fear ye not and be not dismayed at this multitude, for the battle is not your's, but God's," and the Lord gave them a bloodless victory by making their enemies turn their swords against each other. (Ibid.) Does the God of heaven, then, reward superstition by working miracles in its favour?

II. Where are whole nations, when steeped in crime, encouraged to seek and where are they assured that they shall find forgiveness? In Fasting.

When Joel received his prophetic mission, the crimes of God's people had so provoked the Almighty, that he sent his servant to propose to them the alternative, either of preparing themselves for a day (of vengeance) such as had not been from the beginning, nor should be after it, even to the years of generation and generation, or of averting the catastrophe by Fasting. "Now, therefore, saith the Lord, be converted to me with all your heart, in Fasting, and in weeping, and in mourning. And rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn to the Lord your God. For he is gracious and merciful, patient and rich in mercy, and ready to repent of the evil. Who knoweth but he will return and forgive, and leave a blessing behind him." This people, though apparently our equals in every other crime, had not been cursed with our self-conceit; they listened to the admonition—they sought the Lord by Fasting—and the Lord was zealous for his land and spared his people. (Joel, ii.) If the votaries of bigotry are those whom the Lord spares, may I live and die a bigot!

The Fast of the Ninivites, its cause and its effects are so well known that it is almost superfluous to record them. The Ninivites were an idolatrous people—a people so plunged in iniquities, which even Pagan ignorance could not palliate, that God declared that their wickedness had come up before him, calling for a vengeance which is thus announced:—"The word of the Lord came to Jonas the second time, saying, 'Arise and go to Ninive, the great city, and preach in it the preaching that I bid thee;' and the preaching was 'yet forty days and Ninive shall be destroyed;' and the men of Ninive believed in God, and they proclaimed a Fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. And the word came to the king of Ninive, and he rose up out of his throne and cast away his robe from him, and was clothed with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published in Ninive from the mouth of the king and his princes, saying, 'Let neither men nor beasts, oxen nor sheep taste any thing. Let them not feed nor drink water. And let man and beasts be covered with sackcloth and cry to the Lord with all their

strength, and let them turn every one from his evil way and from the iniquity that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and forgive, and will turn away from his fierce anger, and we shall not perish?' And God saw their works, that they were turned from their evil way; and God had mercy with regard to the evil which he had said that he would do them, and he did it not." (Jonas, ii.) God, then, by revelation teaches the Jew to seek mercy by Fasting, and even reason teaches the ignorant and unlettered Pagan to fly to the same asylum.

III. By Fasting the weak and oppressed are encouraged to throw themselves on the protection of heaven, and when they do so they do it not in vain.

Was it an arm of flesh that protected God's people in their march out of Babylon, under Esdras? Alas! for every man that they could muster, the enemy, who way-laid them, could muster thousands. But Esdras sought the protection of heaven by Fasting, and he sought it not in vain. "I proclaimed there a Fast by the river Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before the Lord our God, and might ask of him a right way for us and for our children, and for all our substance. For I was ashamed to ask the king for aid for horsemen to defend us from our enemies in the way, because we had said to the king—the hand of our God is upon all them that seek him in goodness, and his power and strength and wrath upon all them that forsake him. And we Fasted and besought the Lord our God for this, and it fell out prosperously unto us." (1 Esdras, viii.) Was it an arm of flesh that delivered God's people in the days of Judith? Not so! Ozias proposes to surrender after five days, but Judith Fasts: Holofernes falls, and the host of the Assyrians, whose multitude stopped up the torrents flies before the face of a woman. But she was a woman who Fasted all the days of her life, except the Sabbaths, and new moons, and the feasts of the house of Israel. (Judith viii. 6.) She was the advocate of a people who cried to the Lord with great earnestness and humbled their souls in Fastings and prayers, both they and their wives (Judith, iv. 8)—of a people whose high priest (how unlike modern preachers!) said to them, "Know ye that the Lord will hear your prayers, if you continue with perseverance in Fasting and prayers in the sight of the Lord." (Judith, iv. 11.)

Was it an arm of flesh, an arm which trusts to its own strength, and which seeks this strength in luxurious indulgence—was this the arm which rescued the Jews when the haughty and all-powerful Aman had already extorted from Assuerus the fatal decree which, by a general massacre, was in one day to blot out the name of the Jews in their blood? No! It was Esther, a captive woman had insured the aid of heaven by Fasting. When the Jews had heard these things (the decree for a general massacre) "in all the provinces, towns, and places to which the king's cruel edict was come, there was great mourning among the Jews, with Fasting." (Esther, iv. 3.) And when Mordecai urged Esther to "go in to the king and entreat him for her people," she sent to Mordecai in these words,—Go and gather together all the Jews, whom thou shalt find in Susan, and pray ye for me. "Neither eat nor drink for three days and three nights, and I with my hand-maids will Fast in like manner," and then I will go to the king against the law, not being called, and expose myself to death and danger." (Esther, iv. 16.) So Mordecai went and