THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



Fasting

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

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Spiritual Warfare

Fasting

The Discipline That Frees You

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A Daily Bread Formation Book

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INTRODUCTION

The Discipline We Quietly Dropped

Of all the ancient practices of the Christian life, fasting is the one modern Catholics have most quietly abandoned. Prayer we still attempt. Almsgiving, the giving to the poor, we at least acknowledge. But fasting, the deliberate going without food for the sake of God, has largely vanished from the lives of ordinary Catholic men, surviving, if at all, as a vague memory of not eating meat on Fridays in Lent, its meaning forgotten, its practice reduced to a rule few understand and fewer keep.

This is a strange thing, because fasting is everywhere in the Scriptures and everywhere in the lives of the saints. Moses fasted. Elijah fasted. The whole people of Israel fasted in times of repentance and crisis. Jesus himself fasted forty days in the desert before beginning his ministry, and he assumed his followers would fast, saying not if you fast but when you fast. The early Christians fasted regularly, the saints across the centuries fasted as a matter of course, and the Church has always held fasting, alongside prayer and almsgiving, as one of the three pillars of the spiritual life. And yet the modern Catholic man has, for the most part, simply let it go, and with it a source of spiritual power and freedom that the whole tradition insists is real.

When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. — Matthew 6:16

Notice that Jesus says when, not if. He takes for granted that his followers will fast, the way he takes for granted that they will pray and give alms. Fasting is not an optional extra for the especially devout; it is assumed to be part of the ordinary Christian life. And there is a reason the tradition holds onto it so firmly: fasting does something in a man that almost nothing else does. It is not primarily about the body, though it involves the body. It is about freedom, about mastery over appetite, about spiritual strength, about a hunger that opens onto God. The man who recovers fasting recovers a discipline that the saints considered essential to the spiritual life, and that the enemy of the soul is quite content to see him neglect.

This book is about recovering fasting, rightly understood. We will look at what fasting actually is and why Christians do it, which is not what most people assume. We will see its power in the spiritual battle, the reason it belongs in the spiritual warfare section of this library. We will connect it to prayer and to giving, the three pillars that work together. And, importantly, we will address how to fast well and healthily, because fasting can be distorted, turned into pride or self-punishment or an unhealthy relationship with

food, and the tradition has always insisted on moderation, discretion, and the fundamental goodness of the body. Fasting is never about hating the body or harming it. It is about freedom, and love, and God.

The aim is that you recover this abandoned discipline as the saints practiced it: as a source of spiritual strength and freedom, ordered always toward the love of God, undertaken with wisdom and moderation, never as self-punishment but as a means of becoming free.

CHAPTER ONE

What Fasting Actually Is

Not About Food, But About Freedom

The first thing to understand about fasting is that it is not fundamentally about food, any more than prayer is fundamentally about words. Food is the occasion of fasting, the specific thing given up, but the purpose lies elsewhere, and grasping the true purpose transforms the whole practice from a grim exercise in deprivation into something a man might actually desire.

The Mastery of Appetite

At its most basic, fasting is training in the mastery of appetite. Every man knows the experience of being ruled by his desires, of wanting something and reaching for it almost automatically, of appetite in the driver's seat and the will along for the ride. Food is the most basic and constant of these appetites, present several times a day, and precisely because it is so basic, it is the ideal training ground for the will. When a man fasts, he deliberately says no to a legitimate desire, not because food is bad, it is good, but because in choosing to go without it for a time, he strengthens the muscle of self-mastery, the capacity of the will to govern appetite rather than be governed by it. And this capacity, trained on food, carries over to every other appetite: the man who can master his hunger is better able to master his anger, his lust, his greed, his every disordered desire, because he has strengthened, at the most basic level, the will's rule over appetite. Fasting is the boot camp of self-mastery, and the freedom it trains extends far beyond the table.

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. — 1 Corinthians 9:25

Freedom From the Tyranny of Wanting

This points to the deeper purpose: fasting is about freedom. The modern man is, in a way peculiar to our age, enslaved to his appetites, living in a culture engineered to keep him wanting and consuming, where every desire is to be immediately gratified and self-denial is regarded as almost unnatural. In such a world, a man can go his whole life never once telling his appetites no, never discovering that he is capable of it, never tasting the freedom of a will that governs desire rather than serving it. Fasting breaks this. It proves to a man, in his own body, that he is not merely a bundle of appetites to be satisfied, that he can want something and choose not to have it, that he is free. This freedom is exhilarating once tasted, because so much of modern misery comes precisely from enslavement to appetite, the compulsive consuming that never satisfies. The man who fasts discovers he is master in his own house, that his desires do not command him, and this discovery is a liberation that reaches into every corner of his life. Fasting is not deprivation for its own sake. It is the reclaiming of a freedom the modern world has stolen.

The Peculiar Problem of Abundance

There is a reason fasting may matter more for the modern man than for almost any generation before him, and it is the problem of abundance. For most of human history, going without was not a choice but a condition; ordinary people knew hunger because food was scarce, and self-denial was often simply life. The modern man in a prosperous society knows almost nothing of this. He lives amid an abundance and an ease unprecedented in history, with every appetite catered to, every desire gratified at the touch of a screen, comfort and plenty assumed as the baseline of life. This abundance, for all its benefits, carries a hidden spiritual danger: a man who never goes without, who never tells an appetite no, who has never in his life been deliberately hungry, can lose entirely the capacity for self-mastery, becoming soft, driven by comfort, incapable of the self-denial that the spiritual life and indeed any serious life requires. Fasting is the deliberate reintroduction of a healthy hunger into a life of abundance, the choosing of a discipline that circumstances no longer impose, and in an age of unprecedented ease it may be more necessary, not less, than it was for the hungry generations before us. The man surrounded by plenty who never fasts is in a spiritual danger he may not even perceive, the slow softening of a soul that has never learned to want and not have.

A Hunger That Opens Onto God

And there is a deeper purpose still. When a man fasts and feels the hunger, that hunger becomes a teacher. It reminds him, in his body, of a truth he easily forgets when full and comfortable: that he is a creature of need, dependent, not self-sufficient, and that his deepest hunger is not for food at all but for God. The physical hunger of the fast becomes

a kind of prayer, a bodily reaching toward God, an emptying that makes room for him. Man does not live by bread alone, Jesus said, quoting the Scripture, when he himself was fasting and hungry in the desert. The fast teaches this in the flesh: that bread is not enough, that a man is made for more than the satisfaction of his appetites, that his truest hunger is for the God who alone can fill him. This is why fasting has always been joined to prayer, for the hunger of the fast opens the soul toward God, creating an emptiness that turns naturally into prayer, a physical poverty that disposes a man to receive the God for whom he is really hungry.

CHAPTER TWO

Why Christians Fast

The Purposes of the Practice

The tradition names several distinct purposes for fasting, and understanding them helps a man fast with intention rather than as mere rule-keeping. Fasting is not one thing but a practice with several dimensions, and a man may fast for any or all of these reasons.

For Repentance

The most ancient purpose of fasting is repentance, the turning away from sin and back toward God. Throughout the Scriptures, when the people of God recognized their sin, they fasted, as an expression of sorrow, a humbling of themselves before God, a bodily acknowledgment that they had done wrong and wished to turn back. Fasting for repentance is not an attempt to earn forgiveness, which is God's free gift, but an expression of genuine sorrow and a means of turning the whole self, body and soul, back toward God. When a man has sinned seriously and wishes to turn from it, joining fasting to his repentance engages his body in the turning, makes the repentance concrete and total, and disposes him more fully to the grace of conversion. This is why fasting is traditionally associated with the seasons of penance, above all Lent, when the whole Church fasts together as an act of corporate repentance and turning back to God.

Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. — Joel 2:12

For Strength in the Battle

Fasting is also a weapon in the spiritual battle, and this is the reason it belongs in the spiritual warfare section of this library. Jesus indicated that certain kinds of spiritual

struggle require fasting as well as prayer, suggesting that fasting has a particular power against the forces of evil. The tradition has always understood fasting as strengthening a man against temptation, weakening the hold of the disordered appetites through which the enemy so often works, and adding force to prayer in the spiritual combat. The man fighting a serious temptation or besetting sin, the man engaged in real spiritual warfare, finds in fasting a genuine weapon, a way of disciplining the flesh through which temptation attacks, of strengthening the will against the pull of sin, and of adding power to his prayer. The book on the battle for the soul in this library develops the spiritual combat at length; fasting is one of its most ancient and effective weapons, and a man serious about the fight neglects it at his cost.

For Prayer and Petition

Fasting has always been joined to prayer, and especially to prayer of petition, the asking of God for some great need. Throughout the Scriptures, when the people faced a crisis and needed to beseech God urgently, they fasted as they prayed, and the tradition testifies that fasting adds a certain power and seriousness to petition. When a man is praying for something of great importance, a grave need, a serious intention, the conversion of someone he loves, a crisis in his family, joining fasting to that prayer intensifies it, engages his whole self in the asking, and expresses to God the seriousness of his petition in a way that words alone cannot. This does not mean fasting manipulates God or earns an answer; it means that fasting joined to prayer expresses and deepens the earnestness of the asking, and the tradition consistently testifies to its power. The man with a great intention to bring before God does well to fast as he prays for it.

For Mastery of the Whole Man

There is a further purpose worth naming for men in particular, which is the general tempering and disciplining of the whole man that fasting accomplishes. A man is meant to be the master of himself, his appetites governed by his reason and his will, his passions ordered rather than ruling him. This self-mastery is at the root of every real virtue and every genuine strength, and its absence is at the root of most of a man′s failures, the anger that rules him, the lust that drives him, the comfort that softens him, the cravings that command him. Fasting attacks this at its foundation, training the will to govern the most basic appetite and thereby strengthening its rule over all the others. The man who fasts is not merely denying himself food; he is forging the self-mastery on which his whole character depends, the interior discipline that makes a man free, strong, and reliable rather than a creature blown about by his cravings. This is why fasting has always been understood as foundational to the formation of a serious man, and why its abandonment has coincided with a certain softening of Christian manhood. Recover the

fast, and a man recovers the training ground of the self-mastery that undergirds everything else he hopes to be.

For Solidarity and Love

Finally, fasting has a dimension of solidarity and love, connecting a man to the poor and the hungry and freeing his resources to serve them. When a man fasts and feels genuine hunger, he is united, in a small way, to the countless people in the world who are hungry not by choice but by necessity, and this solidarity can move him to compassion and action. This is why fasting has always been joined to almsgiving, the third pillar: what a man saves by fasting, he gives to the poor, so that his self-denial becomes another's provision. Fasting thus turns outward, becoming not merely a private discipline but an act of love, joining a man to the suffering of others and freeing him to serve them. The three pillars, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, work together, and fasting rightly practiced flows naturally into love of neighbor, lest it curve inward and become mere self-focus.

CHAPTER THREE

The Example of Christ

Forty Days in the Desert

At the center of the Christian understanding of fasting stands the example of Christ himself, who fasted forty days in the desert at the beginning of his public ministry, and whose fast reveals what fasting is for and how it functions in the spiritual battle.

Led Into the Desert

Immediately after his baptism, before he preached a word or worked a miracle, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert, where he fasted forty days and forty nights, and at the end of them was hungry. This fast was not incidental; it was the deliberate preparation for his entire mission, a stripping down, an emptying, a time of prayer and hunger in the wilderness before the work began. That Jesus, who needed no purification and no strengthening of his will, nonetheless fasted before his ministry tells us something about the place of fasting in a life given to God: it is preparation, consecration, a clearing of the ground before the great work, and if the Lord himself began his mission with a fast, the servant should not imagine himself above it.

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.
— Matthew 4:4

Tempted at His Weakest

It was precisely at the end of the forty days, when Jesus was hungry and physically weakened, that the tempter came to him, and the first temptation was aimed exactly at his hunger: turn these stones to bread. This is worth noticing, because it reveals the pattern of temptation and the role of fasting in resisting it. The enemy attacks through appetite, through the legitimate needs of the body turned into occasions of sin, tempting a man to satisfy a real hunger in a wrong way or at a wrong time. And Jesus, weakened in body but strong in spirit through his fast, answers not by satisfying the appetite but by declaring that man does not live by bread alone, that there is a deeper hunger and a deeper food, the word and will of God. This is the very pattern fasting trains in a man: the strength to resist the tyranny of appetite, to answer the temptation that comes through hunger not by grasping but by turning to God. Christ in the desert shows both that fasting prepares a man for spiritual battle and how the battle, when it comes through appetite, is won: by a will strengthened to seek God above every bodily craving.

The Pattern for Us

Christ's forty-day fast became the pattern for the Church's great season of fasting, Lent, the forty days in which the whole Church joins Christ in the desert, fasting and praying in preparation for the celebration of his death and resurrection. When a man fasts in Lent, he is walking with Christ into the wilderness, sharing in his fast, being prepared as Christ was prepared, and doing battle with the same tempter who came to Christ at his weakest. The example of Christ dignifies and explains the whole practice: fasting is not a strange or harsh imposition but a following of the Lord, a walking in his footsteps into the desert, where the will is strengthened, the appetites are mastered, and a man is prepared, as Christ was, for the mission and the battle that await him.

The number forty is not accidental, and seeing its pattern in Scripture enriches the Lenten fast. Israel wandered forty years in the wilderness, being formed into the people of God, learning through hunger and dependence to rely on the manna God provided daily. Moses fasted forty days on the mountain before receiving the Law. Elijah traveled forty days to the mountain of God, strengthened by the food an angel gave him. And Christ fasted forty days in the desert before his ministry. Across salvation history, forty days or forty years mark the times of testing, formation, and preparation, the wilderness seasons in which God forms his people through hunger and dependence before bringing them into the fullness he intends. When the Church keeps her forty days of Lent, she enters into this whole pattern, joining Israel in the wilderness and Christ in the desert, undergoing a season of testing and formation and preparation, being made ready, through the discipline of the fast, for the great celebration of the resurrection that waits

on the far side. The Lenten fast is not an arbitrary observance but a participation in the deep biblical pattern of the wilderness, the time of hunger through which God forms and prepares those he loves.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Three Pillars Together

Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving

Fasting was never meant to stand alone. The tradition consistently presents it as one of three pillars of the spiritual life, joined to prayer and to almsgiving, and understanding how the three work together keeps fasting from becoming a distorted, isolated practice and reveals its place in a whole and balanced spiritual life.

Why the Three Belong Together

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches on three practices in succession, assuming his followers will do all three: giving to the poor, praying, and fasting. These three have been understood ever since as the pillars of the spiritual life, and they belong together because they order a man rightly in his three fundamental relationships. Prayer orders a man toward God, lifting his heart to his Creator. Fasting orders a man rightly toward himself, mastering his appetites and freeing him from their tyranny. And almsgiving orders a man rightly toward his neighbor, opening his hand to those in need. Together they form a complete spiritual life, rightly ordered toward God, self, and neighbor, and each supports the others. Fasting without prayer is mere dieting; prayer without fasting can float above the body; almsgiving without the self-denial of fasting can be giving from mere surplus. The three together form a whole, and fasting finds its right place only within that whole.

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. — Matthew 6:3

Fasting Feeds Prayer

Fasting and prayer have a special bond, and the tradition consistently joins them. The hunger of the fast turns naturally into prayer, the emptiness of the body disposing the soul to reach toward God, so that a man who fasts finds his prayer intensified, more earnest, more focused. And prayer gives fasting its meaning and direction, ensuring that the self-denial is offered to God rather than becoming a mere feat of willpower or an

exercise in self-improvement. Fast without prayer and the fasting loses its soul; pray while fasting and the two reinforce each other powerfully, the hunger deepening the prayer and the prayer sanctifying the hunger. This is why serious fasting is always accompanied by increased prayer, and why the man who takes up fasting should take up prayer along with it, letting the physical hunger drive him to God.

The Secret Between You and God

There is a striking emphasis in Christ's teaching on all three pillars that deserves its own attention: he insists they be done in secret. Give to the poor without letting your left hand know what your right hand does. Pray behind a closed door, not on the street corner to be seen. And when you fast, wash your face and anoint your head, so that your fasting is not visible to others but only to your Father who sees in secret. Three times Christ makes the same point: these practices are between a man and God, and the moment they become performances for others to admire, they lose their reward, because the admiration becomes the reward, and God is left out of a thing that was supposed to be for him. This hiddenness is not incidental to fasting; it is close to its essence. Fasting done to be seen, mentioned to others, worn as a badge, is corrupted at the root, turned from an act of love for God into an act of self-display. So the man who fasts tells no one, makes no show of it, keeps it hidden as a secret between himself and his Father, and finds in that very secrecy a purity and a power, for a thing done for God alone, with no human audience and no human reward, is a thing done in pure love, and it is exactly the thing the Father who sees in secret delights to reward.

Fasting Feeds Almsgiving

And fasting flows naturally into almsgiving, the giving to the poor, in a way that keeps it from curving selfishly inward. The ancient practice was concrete: what a man saved by fasting, the cost of the meal not eaten, he gave to the poor, so that his fasting directly became another's provision. This joins the self-denial of the fast to the love of neighbor, ensuring that fasting turns outward into charity rather than becoming a private spiritual achievement. A man who fasts does well to keep this connection, giving what his fasting saves, or otherwise joining his fasting to concrete acts of love for those in need, so that his hunger becomes bread for another, and his discipline becomes love. Fasting joined to almsgiving is fasting rightly ordered, turned outward toward the neighbor Christ commanded us to love.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fasting Well

Moderation, Discretion, and the Good of the Body

Here we must be careful and clear, because fasting, precisely because it is powerful, can be distorted, and the tradition that most prizes fasting is also the tradition that most insists on moderation, discretion, and the goodness of the body. Fasting done wrongly can harm a man, and the saints warn against its distortions as firmly as they commend its right practice.

The Body Is Good

Begin with the foundation: the body is good. The Christian faith is not one of those philosophies that despises the body or treats the material world as evil; it holds, on the contrary, that God made the body good, that he himself took a body in the Incarnation, and that the body will rise again in glory. Fasting is therefore never an act of contempt for the body, never a punishment of a thing regarded as bad, never an expression of the idea that the physical is evil and must be suppressed. This is crucial, because a false and harmful fasting flows from a false view of the body. Right fasting honors the body as good and disciplines it as one disciplines a good thing to make it stronger and freer, the way an athlete trains a good body, not the way an enemy attacks a hated one. If a man finds in himself a fasting driven by contempt for his body, by self-hatred, by the desire to punish himself, that is not Christian fasting but its distortion, and it should be set aside until the false view beneath it is healed. Fasting is the discipline of a good body by a man who loves the God who made it, never the punishment of a body a man has come to despise.

> *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?* — 1 Corinthians 6:19

Moderation and Discretion

The saints and the whole tradition insist relentlessly on moderation and discretion in fasting. Discretion, the virtue of knowing the right measure, is considered essential, because fasting without discretion, driven to excess, does harm to the body and often to the soul, breeding pride, or damaging health, or becoming an end in itself. The tradition is full of warnings against excessive fasting, and full of counsel to fast under obedience and guidance rather than by one's own untethered zeal, precisely because the appetite for spiritual achievement can drive a man to harmful extremes. Right fasting is moderate, measured, ordered toward its spiritual purpose and no further, and it never damages the health or the duties of a man's life. A man who cannot work, or care for his family, or

think clearly, because he has fasted to excess, has fasted wrongly, however zealous his intention. The measure of good fasting is not how severe it is but how well it serves its purpose of freeing a man for God, and that purpose is served by moderation, not by extremity. Begin gently, increase slowly if at all, and never let zeal outrun discretion.

Guard Against the Distortions

Several distortions must be named and guarded against. The first is pride, the oldest danger of fasting, in which a man's self-denial becomes a source of spiritual vanity, a feat he is proud of, a way of feeling superior to others who do not fast. Jesus warned against exactly this, against the fasting done to be seen and admired, and taught that fasting should be hidden, done for God alone, not displayed. The second distortion is turning fasting into mere self-improvement or dieting, emptied of its spiritual purpose, a technique for the body divorced from God, which is not fasting at all but something else wearing its clothes. The third and most serious distortion is the turning of fasting into an unhealthy or disordered relationship with food, in which the discipline becomes bound up with anxiety, control, self-punishment, or a damaged relationship with eating. This is a real danger, and it must be named plainly: for a man who has any history of a disordered relationship with food or eating, fasting in the ordinary sense may not be safe or wise, and such a man should not take it up without speaking to a wise spiritual guide and, where appropriate, to a doctor, and should almost certainly practice self-denial in some other form. There is no spiritual obligation that overrides a man's genuine health, and the Church has always exempted from fasting those for whom it would be harmful. Fasting is one good means of self-denial among several; it is not the only one, and where it would do harm, it should be set aside for another.

The Test of Good Fasting

How does a man tell whether his fasting is healthy or has drifted into distortion? The tradition offers a simple test: look at the fruit. Good fasting makes a man more loving, more patient, more free, more attentive to God and to others, gentler with the people around him, quicker to serve the poor. It draws him outward and upward, toward God and neighbor. Distorted fasting does the opposite: it makes a man proud, or harsh, or anxious, or obsessive, or preoccupied with himself and his own performance; it turns him inward and downward, curving him back on himself. If a man finds his fasting making him irritable, superior, anxious about food, or fixated on his own discipline, that is a sign something has gone wrong, and the remedy is to ease off, seek guidance, and recover the true purpose, which is love. Good fasting always serves love, of God and of neighbor, and where fasting is not serving love but injuring it, whether by making a man proud or by damaging his health or his peace, it has ceased to be the thing the saints practiced and

become a counterfeit that should be set aside. Keep the test always in view: does this fasting make me freer and more loving, or bound and turned in on myself? Let the answer guide the practice.

CHAPTER SIX

How to Begin

The Practical Recovery of Fasting

For the man who wishes to recover fasting, and who has honestly considered the cautions of the previous chapter and judged that fasting is safe and wise for him, the question is how to begin. The answer, as with all the disciplines, is to begin modestly, with intention, and to grow gradually.

Start With What the Church Gives

The natural place to begin is with the fasting the Church herself sets before all the faithful. The Church appoints certain days of fasting and abstinence, above all in the season of Lent and on certain days within it, and she has long encouraged some form of penance on Fridays throughout the year in memory of the Lord's passion. These common observances are the ordinary starting point, a fasting undertaken not alone but with the whole Church, at the times she appoints, in the measure she asks, which is deliberately moderate. A man who has let even this lapse should begin here, recovering the Church's own rhythm of fasting and abstinence, keeping the days she sets aside, entering into the common penance of the whole Body of Christ. This is the safest and surest beginning, because it is moderate, communal, and guided by the wisdom of the Church rather than by a man's own untethered zeal.

And whenever you fast, do not look gloomy, but anoint your head and wash your face.
— Matthew 6:16-17

Simple Forms of Self-Denial

Beyond the Church's appointed days, a man beginning to fast does well to start with simple, moderate forms of self-denial rather than severe ones. Giving up some particular pleasure, a comfort, a habitual indulgence, choosing the plainer thing over the richer, denying oneself some small legitimate satisfaction for the love of God, these are true fasting in the broad sense and an excellent beginning. Such small self-denials train the will, express love for God, and carry little risk, and they can be practiced by nearly

anyone. Fasting need not begin with dramatic abstinence from food; it can begin with the small, hidden, daily choices to deny oneself some legitimate good for God's sake, and for many men this is the wisest and most fruitful place to start, and a form of fasting they can practice for a lifetime.

Do It Quietly, and With Prayer

However a man fasts, let him do it as Christ commanded: quietly, hidden, for God alone, not displayed or discussed or made a matter of pride. And let him always join it to prayer, so that the fasting is offered to God and directed toward him, the hunger becoming a reaching toward God rather than a mere feat of endurance. Fasting done secretly, joined to prayer, ordered toward the love of God and neighbor, undertaken with moderation and discretion, is fasting as the saints practiced it and as the Church commends it, a source of freedom and strength and closeness to God. Begin there, modestly and quietly, and let the practice grow slowly as wisdom and health allow, always keeping it ordered toward its true purpose, which is not the affliction of the body but the freeing of the whole man for God.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Freedom on the Other Side

What Fasting Gives Back

It remains to say what fasting gives back, because the discipline is not an end in itself but a means, and the fruit it yields is worth far more than the food given up. The man who recovers fasting, rightly practiced, finds it returns to him gifts he did not expect.

Freedom From Appetite

The first and most immediate gift is freedom, the very freedom the practice trains. The man who fasts discovers, in his own experience, that he is not the slave of his appetites, that he can want and not have, that his desires do not command him. This freedom, once tasted, spreads. The man who has mastered his hunger finds himself better able to master his other appetites, more free in the face of every craving, less driven by the compulsions that rule so many. In a culture engineered to keep men perpetually consuming and never satisfied, the freedom of the man who has learned to fast is a genuine liberation, a recovery of mastery over the self that the world is constantly trying to steal. This freedom is among the most valuable things a man can possess, and fasting is one of the surest ways to gain it.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore. — Galatians 5:1

Closeness to God

The deeper gift is closeness to God. The hunger of the fast, offered to God and joined to prayer, opens the soul toward him, creates an emptiness he fills, disposes a man to receive him. Men who fast well testify to a heightened sense of God′s presence, a clarity in prayer, a spiritual sensitivity that the comfortable and the full do not know. There is a reason the great pray-ers and the saints fasted; the fast opened them to God, cleared away the fog of comfort and satiety, sharpened their hunger for him. The man who recovers fasting recovers this too, a nearness to God that comes through the door of hunger, a reaching of the whole self, body and soul, toward the One for whom he is truly hungry. This is the deepest gift of fasting, and the reason the tradition has never let it go: that through the small hunger of the fast, a man draws near to the God who alone can satisfy the great hunger of his heart.

Strength for the Battle

And fasting gives strength for the spiritual battle, a will trained to master appetite and therefore better able to resist temptation, a weapon proven against the enemy who so often attacks through the disordered desires of the flesh. The man who fasts is a stronger soldier in the spiritual combat, his will disciplined, his appetites mastered, his prayer intensified, his flesh less easily used against him. In a life that is, as the whole tradition insists, a genuine battle for the soul, fasting is a source of real strength, one of the oldest and most effective disciplines by which a man is made strong for the fight. The freedom it gives, the closeness to God it opens, the strength it builds, these are what fasting returns to the man who takes it up rightly, and they are worth incomparably more than the meals foregone to gain them.

Fasting and Feasting

There is a final gift of fasting that surprises many men: it restores the goodness of feasting. The Catholic vision has never been one of grim perpetual denial; it is a rhythm of fasting and feasting, of seasons of penance and seasons of celebration, of Lent and then Easter, of the Friday fast and then the Sunday feast. And fasting, rightly practiced, actually deepens the joy of the feast, because the man who has fasted knows how to feast, receives the good things of the table as gifts rather than taking them for granted, tastes in the celebration a joy the perpetually satiated can never know. The man who never fasts never really feasts either, because he has never gone without, and so the good things of life become merely ordinary, expected, unremarkable, their goodness dulled by constant

consumption. Fasting restores the capacity for gratitude and joy, sharpening the appetite so that the feast, when it comes, is received with the delight it deserves. This is the Catholic rhythm, and it is a deeply human and joyful one: fast, and then feast; deny yourself for a season, and then celebrate with a full and grateful heart. Fasting is not the enemy of joy but its servant, restoring to a man the capacity to receive the good things of God with the gratitude and delight they were made to give.

CONCLUSION

The Hunger That Points Home

Return to the strange fact we began with, that fasting is the discipline modern Catholics have most quietly dropped, letting go, along with it, a source of freedom and strength the whole tradition insists is real. This book has tried to recover it: to show that fasting is not fundamentally about food but about freedom, the mastery of appetite that liberates the whole man; that Christians fast for repentance, for strength in the battle, for the intensifying of prayer, and for solidarity and love; that Christ himself fasted and made his fast the pattern of the Church′s; that fasting belongs with prayer and almsgiving as one of the three pillars; and that it must be practiced with moderation, discretion, and reverence for the goodness of the body, never as self-punishment, never in a way that harms.

At the center of it all is a hunger that points home. The physical hunger of the fast, small and deliberate and offered to God, becomes a teacher and a prayer, reminding a man in his body of the truth he forgets when full: that he is a creature of need, made for more than the satisfaction of his appetites, hungry at the deepest level not for bread but for God. Man does not live by bread alone. The fast teaches this in the flesh, and turns the hunger it creates into a reaching toward the God who alone can fill it. This is why the saints fasted, and why the enemy is glad to see the practice abandoned: because the small hunger of the fast, rightly offered, opens the soul to the God for whom it truly hungers.

So recover the discipline, wisely and moderately and well. Begin with what the Church gives, the appointed days, the Friday penance, the season of Lent. Add, if it is safe and wise for you, the small hidden self-denials that train the will and express love for God. Join your fasting always to prayer, and let it flow out into giving. Keep it quiet, keep it moderate, keep it ordered toward God, and never let it become pride or punishment or a wound. And discover, as the saints discovered, that the discipline modern men abandoned is a doorway to freedom, to strength, and to a closeness with God that comes

through the honest hunger of a man who has remembered, in his own body, that he does not live by bread alone.

The hunger points home. Let it lead you there. Recover the fast, rightly practiced, and find on the other side of it the freedom, and the strength, and the God, for whom you were truly hungry all along.

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