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CH. XII MEANS OF GRACE: HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

cerning Anna, that she has served the Lord in fasting and prayers [Luke 2:37]. For Luke does not set the worship of God in fasting; but he means that the holy woman has in this way trained herself to sustained prayer. Such was Nehemiah's fast when, with earnest zeal, he prayed God for the liberation of his people [Neh. 1:4]. For this reason, Paul says that believers act rightly if they abstain for a time from the marriage bed, that they may be left freer for prayer and fasting. There he joins fasting with prayer as an aid to it, and warns that it is of no importance of itself except as it is applied to this end [1 Cor. 7:5]. Then, when in the same passage he instructs married couples to give one another mutual consideration [1 Cor. 7:3], it is clear that he is not speaking of daily prayers, but of something demanding more serious attention.

17. Fasting and the practice of penance

*Again, if either pestilence, or famine, or war begins to rage, or if any disaster seems to threaten any district and people—then also it is the duty of the pastors to urge the church to fasting, in order that by supplication the Lord's wrath may be averted. For where he causes danger to appear he warns that he is ready and, so to speak, armed for vengeance. Therefore, as in ancient times the accused were accustomed to abase themselves as suppliants with long beard, unkempt hair, and dark clothing, in order to appeal to the mercy of the judge—so, when we stand before God's judgment seat, it redounds to his glory and to edification of the people, and is also profitable and salutary for us in humble garb to pray that his severity be averted. And it can be readily inferred from the words of Joel that this was the custom among the Israelites. For when he orders a trumpet to be sounded, an assembly to be called, fasting to be appointed, and the things that follow [Joel 2:15–16], he is speaking of matters received as common custom. A little before, he had said that the trial of the people's shameful acts was set, and announced that a day of judgment was now at hand, and had summoned the accused to plead their cause [cf. Joel 2:1]; then he cries out for them to fasten to sackcloth and ashes, to weeping and fasting [Joel 2:12], that is, to prostrate themselves before the Lord also with outward testimonies. Indeed, sackcloth and ashes were perhaps more appropriate to those times; but there is no doubt that meeting and weeping and fasting, and like activities, apply equally to our age whenever the condition of our affairs so demands. For since

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8 It is common to both. In so far, there is a discipline which we are now discussing, why to God concerning any great matter, appoint fasting along with prayer. Thus, faced their hands upon Paul and Barnabas and their ministry to God, a ministry of edifying fasting to prayer [Acts 13:3]. Thus, 11, when they appointed ministers to lead to pray with fasting [Acts 14:23], this kind of fasting is to render themselves nobled for prayer. Surely we experience our mind is not so lifted up to God that with a serious and ardent affection and to understand what Luke relates con-
this is a holy exercise both for the humbling of men and for their confession of humility, why should we use it less than the ancients did in similar need? We read that not only the Israelite church, formed and established on the Word of God [I Sam. 7:6; 31:19; II Sam. 1:12], but also the Ninevites, who had no teaching but the preaching of Jonah [Jonah 3:5], fasted in token of sorrow. What reason is there why we should not do the same?

But, you object, this is an external ceremony which, together with others, ended in Christ. No, it is an excellent aid for believers today (as it always was) and a profitable admonition to arouse them in order that they may not provoke God more and more by their excessive confidence and negligence, when they are chastised by his lashes. Accordingly, Christ, when he excuses his apostles for not fasting, does not say that fasting is abolished, but appoints it for times of calamity and joins it with mourning. “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them.” [Matt. 9:15; Luke 5:34–35].

18. The nature of fasting

But to avoid any error in the term, let us define what fasting is. For here we do not understand it simply as restraint and abstinence in food, but as something else. Throughout its course, the life of the godly indeed ought to be tempered with frugality and sobriety, so that as far as possible it bears some resemblance to a fast. But, in addition, there is another sort of fasting, temporary in character, when we withdraw something from the normal regimen of living, either for one day or for a definite time, and pledge ourselves to a tighter and more severe restraint in diet than ordinarily. This consists in three things: in time, in quality of foods, and in smallness of quantity. By time, I mean that we should carry out those acts of fasting for the sake of which that fast is appointed. As, for example, if a man-fast for the sake of solemn prayer, he should come to it without breaking his fast. Quality consists in that all elegance be absent, and that, content with common and baser foods, we should not whet our palate with delicacies. The rule of quantity in this is that we should eat more sparingly and lightly than is our custom; only for need, not also for pleasure.

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