3. **FASTING**

**BY FASTING THE MONK BECOMES FREE WITH REGARD TO FOOD**

3. **AND so the first conflict we must enter upon is that against gluttony,** which we have explained as the pleasures of the palate: and in the first place as we are going to speak of the system of fasts, and the quality of food, we must again recur to the traditions and customs of the Egyptians, as everybody knows that they contain a more advanced discipline in the matter of self-control, and a perfect method of discrimination.

4. [...] **And so we must seek a model of discretion and continence more particularly from those from whom we see that those virtues flow forth more abundantly through the grace of the Holy Spirit; not that any one can alone acquire those things which are divided among many, but in order that in those good qualities of which we are capable we may advance towards the imitation of those who especially have acquired them.**

5. **AND so on the manner of fasting a uniform rule cannot easily be observed, because everybody has not the same strength; nor is it like the rest of the virtues, acquired by steadfastness of mind alone. And therefore, because it does not depend only on mental firmness, since it has to do with the possibilities of the body, we have received this explanation concerning it which has been handed down to us, viz.: that there is a difference of time, manner, and quality of the refreshment in proportion to the difference of condition of the body, the age, and sex: but that there is one and the same rule of restraint to everybody as regards continence of mind, and the virtue of the spirit. [...]**

7. **BODILY weakness is no hindrance to purity of heart, if only so much food is taken as the bodily weakness requires, and not what pleasure asks for. It is easier to find men who altogether abstain from the more fattening kinds of foods than men who make a moderate use of what is allowed to our necessities; and men who deny themselves everything out of love of continence than men who taking food on the plea of weakness preserve the due measure of what is sufficient. For bodily weakness has its glory of self-restraint, where though food is permitted to the failing body, a man deprives himself of his refreshment. although he needs it, and only indulges in just so much food as the strict judgment of temperance decides to be sufficient for the necessities of life, and not what the longing appetite asks for. The more delicate foods, as they conduce to bodily health, so they need not destroy the purity of chastity, if they are taken in moderation. For whatever strength is gained by partaking of them is used up in the toil and waste of care. Wherefore as no state of life can be deprived of the virtue of abstinence, so to none is the crown of perfection denied.**

14. **FIRST then we must trample under foot gluttonous desires, and to this end the mind must be reduced not only by fasting, but also by vigils, by reading, and by frequent compunction of heart for those things in which perhaps it recollects that it has been deceived or overcome, sighing at one time with horror at sin, at another time inflamed with the desire of**
perfection and saintliness: until it is fully occupied and possessed by such cares and meditations, and recognizes the participation of food to be not so much a concession to pleasure, as a burden laid upon it; and considers it to be rather a necessity for the body than anything desirable for the soul. […]

17. **Would** you like to hear a true athlete of Christ striving according to the rules and laws of the conflict? “I,” said [the Apostle Paul], “so run, not as uncertainly; I so fight, not as one that beateth the air: but I chastise my body and bring it into subjection, lest by any means when I have preached to others I myself should be a castaway.” You see how he made the chief part of the struggle depend upon himself, that is upon his flesh, as if on a most sure foundation, and placed the result of the battle simply in the chastisement of the flesh and the subjection of his body. […] He does not run uncertainly, because, “forgetting those things which are behind, he reaches forth to those that are before, pressing towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus,” whither he ever directs his mental gaze, and hastening towards it with all speed of heart, proclaims with confidence, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.” And because he knows he has run unweariedly “after the odour of the ointment” a of Christ with ready devotion of heart, and has won the battle of the spiritual combat by the chastisement of the flesh, he boldly concludes and says, “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me in that day.” And that e might open up to us also a like hope of reward, if we desire to imitate him in the struggle of his course, he added: “But not to me only, but to all also who love His coming;” declaring that we shall be sharers of his crown in the day of judgment, if we love the coming of Christ — not that one only which will be manifest to men even against their will; but also this one which daily comes to pass in holy souls — and if we gain the victory in the fight by chastising the body. And of this coming it is that the Lord speaks in the Gospel. “I,” says He, “and my Father will come to him, and will make our abode with him.” And again: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the gate, I will come in to him and will sup with him, and he with me.”

21. For it is not an external enemy whom we have to dread. Our foe is shut up within ourselves: an internal warfare is daily waged by us: and if we are victorious in this, all external things will be made weak, and everything will be made peaceful and subdued for the soldier of Christ. We shall have no external enemy to fear, if what is within is overcome and subdued to the spirit. And let us not believe that that external fast from visible food alone can possibly be sufficient for perfection of heart and purity of body unless with it there has also been united a fast of the soul. For the soul also has its foods which are harmful, fattened on which, even without superfluity of meats, it is involved in a downfall of wantonness. Slander is its food, and indeed one that is very dear to it. A burst of anger also is its food, even if it be a very slight one; yet supplying it with miserable food for an hour, and destroying it as well with its deadly savour. Envy is a food of the mind, corrupting it with its poisonous juices and never ceasing to make it wretched and miserable at the prosperity and success of another.
Kenodoxia, i.e., vainglory is its food, which gratifies it with a delicious meal for a time; but afterwards strips it clear and bare of all virtue, and dismisses it barren and void of all spiritual fruit, so that it makes it not only lose the rewards of huge labours, but also makes it incur heavier punishments. All lust and shifty wanderings of heart are a sort of food for the soul, nourishing it on harmful meats, but leaving it afterwards without share of the heavenly bread and of really solid food. If then, with all the powers we have, we abstain from these in a most holy fast, our observance of the bodily fast will be both useful and profitable. For labour of the flesh, when joined with contrition of the spirit, will produce a sacrifice that is most acceptable to God, and a worthy shrine of holiness in the pure and undefiled inmost chambers of the heart. But if, while fasting as far as the body is concerned, we are entangled in the most dangerous vices of the soul, our humiliation of the flesh will do us no good whatever, while the most precious part of us is defiled: since we go wrong through that substance by virtue of which we are made a shrine of the Holy Ghost. For it is not so much the corruptible flesh as the clean heart, which is made a shrine for God, and a temple of the Holy Ghost. We ought therefore, whenever the outward man fasts, to restrain the inner man as well from food which is bad for him: that inner man, namely, which the blessed Apostle above all urges us to present pure before God, that it may be found worthy to receive Christ as a guest within, saying "that in the inner man Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."

Cassian loves to illustrate his teaching with examples; in what follows he shows that in his concern for austerity the monk remains a sociable man and has more care for his neighbour than for his personal asceticism.

24. When we had come from the region of Syria and had sought the province of Egypt, in our desire to learn the rules of the Elders, we were astonished at the alacrity of heart with which we were there received so that no rule forbidding refreshment till the appointed hour of the fast was over was observed, such as we had been brought up to observe in the monasteries of Palestine; but except in the case of the regular days, Wednesdays and Fridays, wherever we went the daily fast was broken: and when we asked why the daily fast was thus ignored by them without scruple one of the elders replied: “The opportunity for fasting is always with me. But as I am going to conduct you on your way, I cannot always keep you with me. And a fast, although it is useful and advisable, is yet a free-will offering. But the exigencies of a command require the fulfilment of a work of charity. And so receiving Christ in you I ought to refresh Him but when I have sent you on your way I shall be able to balance the hospitality offered for His sake by a stricter fast on my own account. For ‘the children of the bridegroom cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them;’ but when he has departed, then they will rightly fast.” [...]

38. It seems to me worth while to hand down another charitable act. [...] [Archebius], sprung from no ignoble family, while yet a child, scorning the love of this world and of his kinsfolk, fled to the monastery which is nearly four miles distant from the aforementioned town, where he so passed all his life, that never once throughout the whole of fifty years did he enter or see the village from
which he had come, nor even look upon the face of any woman, not even his own mother. In the mean while his father was overtaken by death, and left a debt of a hundred solidi. And though he himself was entirely free from all annoyances, since he had been disinherited of all his father’s property, yet he found that his mother was excessively annoyed by the creditors. Then he through consideration of duty somewhat moderated that gospel severity through which formerly, while his parents were prosperous, he did not recognize that he possessed a father or mother on earth; and acknowledged that he had a mother, and hastened to relieve her in her distress, without relaxing anything of the austerity he had set himself. For remaining within the cloister of the monastery he asked that the task of his usual work might be trebled. And there for a whole year toiling night and day alike he paid to the creditors the due measure of the debt secured by his toil and labour, and relieved his mother from all annoyance and anxiety; ridding her of the burden of the debt in such a way as not to suffer aught of the severity he had set himself to be diminished on plea of duteous necessity. Thus did he preserve his wonted austerities, without ever denying to his mother’s heart the work which duty demanded, as, though he had formerly disregarded her for the love of Christ, he now acknowledged her again out of consideration of duty. [...]

41. There is still one valuable charge of the blessed Macarius to be brought forward by us, so that a saying of so great a man may close this book of fasts and abstinence. He said then that a monk ought to bestow attention on his fasts, just as if he were going to remain in the flesh for a hundred years; and to curb the motions of the soul, and to forget injuries, and to loathe sadness, and despise sorrows and losses, as if he were daily at the point of death. For in the former case discretion is useful and proper as it causes a monk always to walk with well-balanced care, and does not suffer him by reason of a weakened body to fall from the heights over most dangerous precipices: in the other high-mindedness is most valuable as it will enable him not only to despise the seeming prosperity of this present world, but also not to be crushed by adversity and sorrow, and to despise them as small and paltry matters, since he has the gaze of his mind continually fixed there, whither daily at each moment he believes that he is soon to be summoned.

JOHN CASSIAN, *Institutes*, Book 5