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SELF-DENIAL AND SALVATION

The power of fasting, a weapon to rediscover

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In two thousand years of Christian history, fasting has probably never been in such a crisis as it is today. For some decades now, this penitential practice has been reduced to a trifle, even within the Catholic Church, both among the laity and the consecrated, with a few exceptions. Yet, the Holy Bible, the Church's two-thousand-year-old tradition, and the example of the saints tell us that fasting is a necessary weapon in spiritual combat. It does not only have a personal dimension, but has implications for the entire economy of salvation. While it facilitates our path of purification, it helps us grow in inner freedom and, therefore, in love for God and neighbour.

Fasting, experienced in union with Christ, is of great help in keeping the devil away. Commenting on the famous verse in Matthew's Gospel (Mt 17:21: *This race of demons cannot be driven out except by prayer and fasting*), saint John Chrysostom explains that these are "words that refer not only to the kind of lunatic demons, but to every class of demons. Fasting indeed gives much wisdom, makes man like an angel from

heaven, and fights the incorporeal powers. But prayer is also necessary as the main element; and he who prays properly and fasts, does not need many things, and thus does not become miserly, and is ready for almsgiving. He who fasts is then light-footed, prays with vigilance, extinguishes harmful lusts, makes God propitious, and humbles the proud soul. Therefore he who prays with fasting has two wings, even lighter than the winds themselves”.

Fasting thus not only favours the conversion of the individual, but can obtain - accompanied by a solid Christian practice - the greatest graces within a family, in the Church, in the world. Graces of a spiritual order above all, but also material ones, including peace among nations. Our Lady also reminds us of this in various apparitions of contemporary times, in which she recommends prayer (especially the Holy Rosary), fasting, and other sacrifices as indispensable supernatural means to even stop or avert wars.

The necessity of fasting has its basis in the fact that it, Christianly understood, involves man in his totality of body and soul. While other works of charity - while good and clearly not to be neglected - may be part of what is superfluous to us, fasting implies a donation of ourselves to God. "Why is Satan so weakened when we fast? When we offer God something that touches our body, it can be said that we truly offer ourselves", explains Sister Emmanuel Maillard - who has been established in Medjugorje since the late 1980s - in a profound catechesis entitled *Liberarsi e guarire per mezzo del digiuno* [Freeing and healing oneself through fasting]. "As Father Slavko [S. Barbarić, † 2000] said very well", adds the French nun, "fasting reveals our addictions. When we fast on bread and water, there are 'mirages' that call us: Coffee? Cigarettes? Wine? Chocolate? Ice cream? Grappa? Liqueurs? They point us to the things to which we are most attached. But Our Lady does not come to point out our attachments, she comes so that we can be free. [...] Fasting creates, in a way, an emptiness, a space in our soul, in our body, and also in our heart”.

This space freed by fasting, Sister Emmanuel adds, "is new ground in our lives that God will be able to occupy" as never before. After all, growth in the Christian life means imitating as much as possible the life of the Lord Jesus, who prepared himself for his public ministry with long fasts, including that of forty days in the desert. Just as the Redemption was obtained through Christ's sufferings in spirit and body, so our participation in his work of salvation necessarily passes through mortifying both the former and the latter.

It is not just a matter of renouncing food as much as possible. In fact, it is good,

besides depriving the palate, to deprive the other senses as well - thus guarding the eyes, tongue, ears - in order to practise self-mastery and free oneself from all the bad habits that distance us from God. Renunciation (even of what is allowed) is not an end in itself, but is directed, as the heavenly Mother herself indicated at Fatima and elsewhere, towards renouncing sin. In this vein, with regard to true Lenten fasting, saint Leo the Great states that it consists in "abstaining not only from food, but also and above all from sin". Fasting is ultimately about experiencing that union with God capable of radically changing reality, as in the experience of the saints. No one is excluded from this vocation, since each of us is important in the realisation of God's plan, who calls us to be the *light of the world* (Mt 5:14).

It is well known that the events linked to Medjugorje have led to a *rediscovery of fasting*, on bread and water, on Wednesdays and Fridays. Two days that the early Christians already observed, as testified by the Didaché (a text from the 1st-2nd century, included in the sub-apostolic literature), where, among other things, a comment on the commandment to love one's neighbour, reads: "Fast for your persecutors". To be more effective, fasting is to be observed for 24 hours. But the guiding criterion is always that of freedom in self-giving, because the beginning and end of the practice of fasting must have a common denominator: love. Just as one can start gradually with the Rosary, especially for those who have never prayed, so it is with fasting. Sister Emmanuel, who in the above catechesis also gives valuable practical suggestions (including the choice of bread), sums up: "If you can fast immediately on bread and water two days a week, thank God, but you can also do it in stages [...] and increase little by little".

Fasting is all the more meritorious the more it remains secret, wherever possible. It should certainly not be lived in a spirit of Phariseeism, but in a spirit of supplication to God - always together with prayer - to obtain humility and conversion for ourselves, our loved ones, and also for those who do us harm. Saint Peter Chrysologus sums it up in his Lenten sermon *Prayer knocks, fasting obtains, mercy receives*. "There are three things by which faith stands firm, devotion remains constant, and virtue endures. They are prayer, fasting and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains, mercy receives. Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other. Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. Let no one try to separate them; they cannot be separated. If you have only one of them or not all together, you have nothing. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others you open God's ear to yourself".