

itual training than through the practice of fasting."

Now I must address the third great means to gain and keep purity, which is prayer, mentioned above in the context of fasting. But first, let us return to St. Thomas briefly:

It should be kept in mind, however, that when the mind is turned away from sin the displeasure with sin can be so forceful, and the attachment of the mind to God so strong, that no obligation to punishment will remain. For, as may be gathered from things said earlier, the punishment that a person suffers after the remission of sin is necessary so that the mind may adhere more firmly to the good; since man is chastised by punishments, these punishments are, then, like remedies. It is also necessary so that the order of justice may be observed, in the sense that he who has sinned must stand the penalty. But love for God is enough to set the mind of man firmly in the direction of the good, especially if this love be strong; and displeasure for a past fault, when intense, brings great sorrow. Consequently, through the strength of one's love for God, and of one's hatred of past sin, there is removed the need for punishments of satisfaction or of purification. Moreover, if this strength be not great enough to set aside punishments entirely, nevertheless, the stronger it is, the smaller will be the punishment that suffices.

So the question is, how do we get that love of God? How do we grow in it by prayer, and how is prayer, fasting and confession connected?

To answer this I turn to a Redemptorist moral theologian, Fr. Bernard Haring. In his three volume series, The Law of Christ, he has this to say about the beatitude,

"Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted:"

It is dreadful that we can master life only by following the darksome and painful path of sorrow, but the simple truth that there is a way for us to obtain life at all is glorious.

How true – though heaven knows there are many who seek to master life through things like anger or pleasure. But he is exactly right. An "abiding sorrow" as Bl. Dom Marmion put it, is more beneficial to progress in the interior life than is recourse to anger or the seeking of happiness. And how true that it is glorious to think that there is a way for every one of us to obtain everlasting life! What good news! Again, Fr. Haring:

Sorrow is entry into the pain and sadness of Christ's passion. But its countenance already reflects something of the glory of resurrection. Just as the Lord does not extol all suffering without qualification, but only that which one bears with Him and for Him, so too He blesses only that mourning and sadness which is borne in union with His agony on Olivet and mingles with His cry of dereliction on the cross. In meaning and purpose our suffering and mourning must unite with His. All the sadness which the sufferings of this life bring to us must flow back into the one great sadness over sin, offense to God, loss of our souls, peril to salvation. "For the sorrow that is according to God produces repentance that surely tends to salvation, whereas the sorrow that is according to the world produces death." (2 Cor. 7:10) Sorrow in the heart according to God keeps the repentant sinner from being swept into the turbulent maelstrom of countless earthly affections.

I can't say strongly enough how important it is to grasp this concept, for the gaining and keeping of purity.

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Continuing with the subject of fasting, once you have acquired the habit of liturgical fasting (yes, it should have happened long before, but better late than never), then build on that foundation; add to it; increase it. You could for example, skip a meal on Wednesday, such as breakfast or lunch. I say Wednesday, because that was the day on which Our Lord was betrayed to the Sanhedrin by Judas Iscariot (called Spy Wednesday in older English). Or you could deny yourself dessert on some days, or skip the use of condiments or soda or beer or wine and other spirits. There is the discipline of not eating between meals (a difficult penance if you are used to snacking).

You should also consider fasting from entertainments, especially electronic entertainments, or from the news or the internet, or the television or radio, etc. These fasts all help gain control over the flesh.

But fasting from sin in some other area where you could have more success than you do in purity will also help gain purity. St. Francis de Sales pointed out that if you grow in one virtue, all the other virtues are strengthened, and if one vice is decreased, the other vices decrease in power over us.

And bodily fasting can be meaningless unless it is joined with a spiritual fast from sin. Without that spiritual fast, bodily fasting can become just a diet. St. Basil the Great says this about the subject: "Let us fast an acceptable and very pleasing fast to the Lord. True fast is the estrangement from evil, temperance of tongue, abstinence from anger, separation from desires, slander, falsehood and perjury. Privation of these is true fasting."

By now we should see that fasting is not just a matter of will power. Spiritual fasting cannot be done without grace. Fasting energizes prayer and prayer energizes fasting. Both are weak without each other. So real fasting takes prayer, and frequent prayer, asking for the grace of spiritual fasting.

And we need to be aware of the danger of pride. For with any kind of self-discipline, penance, or fasting comes a temptation to pride. We face the danger of believing that we are superior to others because we fast, or thinking that fasting is an end in itself. But fasting itself is never the goal, nor does it make us perfect or more spiritual than others. Rather, fasting is an aid, a training tool in our ascent toward perfection, which is found in a pure, self-giving love of God and neighbor. "Be on your guard when you begin to mortify your body by abstinence and fasting," says St. Jerome, "lest you imagine yourself to be perfect and a saint; for perfection does not consist in this virtue. It is only a help; a disposition; a means though a fitting one, for the attainment of true perfection."

Here is a conclusion on this subject taken from a very good website called *The Catholic Gentleman*. "If we neglect fasting, our spiritual life will always be mediocre. We will be weak in the combat against our passions, we will easily succumb to temptation, and we will never truly overcome our inherent selfishness and self-indulgence. Our desire should be to strengthen ourselves and be the best that we can be. We should train ourselves to be strong in the spiritual warfare, so we can resist the temptations of the evil one. There is no better way to begin this spir-