

I DON'T LIKE LENT

BY DANIEL A. LORD, S.J.

THEY wandered leisurely out of the dining room and took their places around the logs that burned on the large living-room hearth. A maid appeared, bearing a tray loaded with coffee cups and the essentials for the brewing of coffee, and with a tall brandy bottle and the necessary small glasses. The guests had found comfortable chairs and dropped into them with the realization that the chairs were very, very comfortable indeed before the Bradleys' open fire.

Most of the guests took coffee. Their host filled a small glass with brandy until another drop would have meant an overflow, and then lifted it appreciatively in the direction of Father Hall.

"Better have a brandy," he suggested. "Lent starts Wednesday."

The priest looked up with a quizzical smile.

"Thanks, I prefer the coffee. But what's Lent got to do with brandy? Don't you remember the old saw: 'Thank God for the Council of Trent that legislated about food but not about drink?'"

"I Hate Lent"

They all laughed. But Grace Melville, young and charming, and only a few years older than the Bradley twins (both out for the evening), glowered into the fire.

"I don't like Lent," she said, quite savagely. They all looked at her for a moment, and then the priest heard them sigh in unison.

"Thanks for the honesty," said Mrs. Bradley. "Since we're playing truth, I hate Lent."

"Never liked it until I got beyond the age when it has to be observed," old Mrs. Harrison agreed, in her high, but emphatic voice. "Now I love it. I love to see you young people groaning about it. I love to have my little snack between meals and my meat three times a day, while you pick the bones out of herring and grow ravenous about ten o'clock in the evening."

Not Bound

"Not being a Catholic, I don't much mind it," smiled Dr. Allenby, nodding companionably to youngish Shirley Green, who was of his same lack of faith.

"Lucky dog," growled their host.

For a moment Father Hall felt personally responsible for Lent. He had the sudden impression that they all thought he had started the business of the forty-day fast. Really, he assured himself rapidly, he hadn't. It was one of those things that he had inherited from the pretty early days of Christianity.

Not Guilty

"Honestly," he said, "I'm not responsible for Lent."

His hostess looked properly embarrassed. He had phoned from the library, where he had spent the day grubbing up some local colour he needed for the novel he was writing, and she had begged him to join them at dinner. Though he was all set to motor back to his Lakeside parish and had called up only to get some first-hand information on the beloved twins, Dick and Sue, he had thought for a moment and then consented. And now she saw him being pushed into a corner by the thoughtless remarks of herself and her friends.

"Oh, no," she said hurriedly. "We know you'd never have thought up anything so disagreeable as Lent"

The priest assumed a very solemn look.

"And maybe that's just where you are wrong. Maybe if I had the doing of it, I'd have put in two Lents a year, one in winter for the good of your souls, and one in summer for the good of your bodies. The fact is, I thoroughly approve of Lent. I think it's a noble institution."

Survival

“Really now!” exclaimed Dr. Allenby. As professor of history in State University, he was always interested in the recurrence of these mediaeval ideas among his Catholic acquaintances.

He thought them distinctly interesting.

“I don’t see in any case,” went on the priest, “what you are worrying about. Do any of you really fast?”

“Well,” Bradley coughed, “I give up cigars.”

“Which certainly puts the rest of the family in a penitential mood,” his wife added.

“I’m a hard-working man,” Bradley said, apologising, “and I need my food.”

“Hard-working!” scoffed his wife. “While you’re out on the golf-links making important contacts, who does the work in your office? That poor little secretary of yours, Nell Sullivan. And I’ll bet she fasts, too.”

Natural Fasts

“As far as I can make out,” the priest said, looking at Grace Melville, who had started all this, “practically every girl I’ve heard of fasts all the year round—except for the nibbles between meals. I’ll wager that Miss Melville here, or your own secretary, eats a slice of toast and tosses off a cup of coffee for breakfast, lunches on a nourishing lettuce sandwich or a shrimp salad, and eats at most one meal a day. That is, I’m told by competent authorities the ordinary diet of the modern young lady.”

Dr. Allenby nodded in agreement

“I wish the young ladies who came to my morning classes looking pale and haggard would once in a while eat a decent breakfast.”

Medieval

“That’s quite a different thing.” Shirley Green took up the cudgels. “Lent always seems to me so—well, so medieval. Isn’t that what you think?” Dr. Allenby nodded. The young lady was intelligent. He wished she were in his history class. She seemed to read his mind. “It makes me think of the ancient days when it wasn’t quite holy to take a bath, and when men went off into the desert, and spent the rest of their lives on top of a stone column. It’s not, well, it’s not modern.”

“Modern or not,” repeated Grace, “I don’t like Lent. I’m embarrassed if I go to a movie. I feel that I shouldn’t play bridge. If the dessert is good, I have an instinct that I ought to give it up. It’s a most uncomfortable time.”

Give It Up

“Honestly, Father,” asked Mrs. Bradley in all sincerity, “don’t you think that the Church will give up Lent one of these days?”

They all looked at the priest with real interest. Most of the group knew him little. As he was a priest, the non-Catholics among them rather expected him to rise indignantly and cry out, “The Church never changes!” They looked forward a little shrinkingly to some sort of “scene.” Instead, Father Hall gazed thoughtfully into the fire and answered with some hesitation.

“The Church may at that. Of course, it can. And on occasion it has done so. It abolished Lent for the Spaniards, to thank them for their successful crusades against the Mohammedans. The Bishop of Louisville, after the floods there, cancelled Lent with a stroke of his pen; the people could eat meat even on Friday. Lent’s not a matter of faith or morals. I suppose it’s really dearest to the heart of the Church because it recalls the forty days’ fast of Christ. ‘After all,’ the Church argues, ‘if Christ, who was without sin, fasted completely from food for forty days, we who are sinners should be willing to give a pale and incomplete imitation of His perfect fast by observing Lent!’”

Just Sentiment

Dr. Allenby looked at Miss Green with a flash of understanding.

“Oh,” said Miss Green, catching his meaning, “if Lent is just a matter of sentiment—”

“One really,” agreed the professor, “mustn’t argue with sentiment.”

And they sat back to their coffee, the argument completed.

“I’m awfully dumb,” said Grace, glad that she could round off the discussion she had started by picking on a harmless point, “but it’s just dawning on me that our Lent lasts forty days because of Christ’s forty-days’ fast. It is a lovely sentiment.”

But now Father Hall was alert.

Unless

“Sentiment!” Oh, the forty days are selected as a matter of sentiment. But fasting has nothing to do with sentiment, believe me. Christ was no sentimentalist. The Church remembers what He said with flat emphasis. ‘Unless you do penance you shall all likewise perish.’ The choice was clear: Do penance or be eternally lost.

“Now, the fact is that most people need someone else to force them to do difficult things. Children have to be dragooned into eating spinach. Did you ever see a nurse forcing a strong man to take medicine that he disliked? And a trainer has to run along with a pugilist in training to be sure that his charge doesn’t stop his roadwork and start picking daisies in the first cool spot.

“‘Do penance!’ cried Christ. ‘I don’t want to,’ says man. ‘Or perish,’ said Christ. ‘Well, one of those days I’ll get around to it,’ says the man. So the Church wisely steps in and says, ‘All right, children; just to simplify the whole thing, you do penance for forty days during Lent, and that will cover a large section of your responsibility. Let’s all together, the whole world of us Christian men and women, get this business of penance done and off our minds.’ Simple?”

Why Penance?

Shirley Green shook her head.

“Frankly, it’s not. Why should we do penance? I see no purpose in that at all. Sounds sort of Hindu-fakirish.”

“It’s connected,” explained Dr. Allenby, in an aside that was, of course, loud enough for the entire group, “with the other medieval concept of sin.”

Father Hall shook his head.

“Oh, no, doctor. With the universal concept of sin. Sin is a crime against God, and crime must be punished. Sin is an insult to our heavenly Father, and you have to amend an insult with an apology. Sin is an act by which the will turns from its Creator to a creature, and that will has to be straightened out, put back into its right direction.”

Shirley’s young and wrinkleless brow grew deliberately furrowed.

“But penance—”

Natural

“Penance,” said the priest, “is simply a matter of readjustment. Says the criminal, the sinner: ‘My sin is going to be justly punished either in this world or in hell or purgatory. But I wonder if God would not be more likely to forgive me my crime if I punished myself just to prove that I’m sorry and admit I rate punishment.’ So he does penance as a proof that he is sorry and to forestall God’s punishment. ‘I’ve insulted my Father,’ says the sinner. ‘I’ll prove that I’m feeling deeply apologetic by doing something hard for Him.’

“So he does something hard, a penance. ‘By sin,’ reasons the sinner, ‘I turned my will away from God and grabbed this creature. All right. To prove that I know I made a mistake, I’ll turn away from this creature—food, drink, a good time, the theatre, candy—and turn deliberately to God. God will see that I am trying to get my will straight in line once more.’ That’s all it is, this penance. Sounds very logical to me.”

If Sin Exists

“Logical, of course,” said Dr. Allenby, “if you accept the assumption that there is such a thing as sin.”

“An assumption,” smiled Father Hall, “that the world finds very difficult to escape. We won’t go into that right now, but penance is so natural that when a man is sorry for a crime, he will give himself up to the punishment of the law; when a man has offended a friend, he goes out of his way to do something hard for him; when a man finds his will leading him into evil paths, he takes stern will exercises to force that will back into right lines. Just a matter of common sense, that’s all.”

Dr. Allenby was a little piqued. He brushed his face with an immaculate linen handkerchief before he said, in the most elaborately off-hand way:

Love Matters

“Of course, if your God is so tremendous and infinite, and we as His creatures are so small and insignificant, I really don’t see what difference our giving up of things like candy or coffee or cigars or a night at the movies can possibly make to Him.”

Mrs. Bradley admitted in her heart that, as the professor put it, the idea of giving up an ice-cream soda for an infinite God looked just a little absurd.

“Your difficulty,” replied the priest, “is, of course, based on the supposition that God is not our Loving Father who is enormously interested in His children. What is little when love is concerned? I’ve seen a mother bursting with love when a child brought her the most ridiculous mess of paper and chalk with the proud ‘I made this to give to you, mother.’ I recall seeing a father, who is not so terribly far from us, wearing in his buttonhole a withered dandelion. You see, his baby daughter picked it for him and toddled over and put it into his lapel. I think he preferred that to a gardenia. Wouldn’t you, my good and blushing friend?”

And, truth to tell, the whole group could see that the red in Pere Bradley’s cheek was not due to the sudden warmth of the hearth logs.

Sacrifice

“You must remember, professor,” Father Hall continued, “that one of the sweetest ways in which we can show our love for a person is with gifts. We always say, ‘It isn’t the value of the gift; it’s the spirit of the giver that matters.’ That’s why trifles wrapped round with love are much more precious than tiaras or mink coats given lovelessly.

“The giving of a gift to God is all we mean by sacrifice. In the Old Law the Jews gave Him cattle and bread and wine. We Catholics give Him His divine Son in the Mass. But we want to give Him something that we would personally like for ourselves. So we sacrifice cigars or wine or candy or the movies. We say, ‘O God, I’ll give them up just to show that I do love You.’ And the harder we find it to give them up, the more precious they will be to our Father.

“It’s perfectly true that God is made no happier by our giving Him a chocolate malted milk or a stick of chewing gum or a highball. God isn’t likely to find use for any of those things. But it means a lot that we, His children, want to give Him the things we fain would hug to our own selfish hearts. We give Him what we somehow very much want.

“We don’t say, ‘Dear God, during Lent for Your sake I am going to give up anchovies for breakfast.’ Anchovies for breakfast would give us a pretty bad thirst all through the day. Instead, we say, ‘I’m going to give You these cigars, which are pretty necessary to my happiness, or this cold drink in the afternoon, which has come to be rather essential to me.’ We give it to God precisely because it would make us happy to have it ourselves.”

Manicheans

The professor was unimpressed and unconvinced.

“There is,” he said, “a certain strain of the Manichean about even the best of Catholics.

Don’t be offended, Father; but it astonishes me to see how heresies triumph even over the Church that condemns

them.”

Old Mrs. Harrison roused herself indignantly. “I wish,” she sniffed, with the privilege of the old to insult the younger, “that professors wouldn’t be pedants. Why must they drag in long and technical terms?” She faced the professor, her feathers ruffled. “What kind of a strain is that?”

“Manichean,” smiled Dr. Allenby. “They were a group of heretical Christians who thought that everything you could see or taste or feel was bad. In fact, the devil made all the visible world, God made only the spiritual world. So the good Christian must despise everything he could see or taste or feel. A good dinner was essentially evil. A beautiful landscape was positively naughty. Good music was wicked. And the higher the saint, the more he went around, like the monkeys in the famous monkey trio, holding his ears, shutting his eyes, clapping a hand down over his mouth. A good Christian gave up everything pleasant. And you see, that’s just what is back of Lent. The world is pleasant. Therefore, it must be wicked. Because it is wicked, let’s give it up, at least for Lent.”

Bunched

“The Puritans must have been Manicheans,” suggested Grace Melville.

“They were,” agreed Dr. Allenby. “It was wicked to be happy. It was a sin to have a good time.”

“Well,” boomed Bradley, waving his brandy meditatively back and forth in front of his nostrils, “that explains those infernal old Prohibitionists. May their ghosts never walk!”

“And it explains people like the Hindu fakirs,” supplemented Shirley Green, “and Buddhist monks and those greasy old fathers of the desert who never took a bath and lived on bean soup and black bread dipped in water. They disliked the world because it was beautiful. Isn’t it sad that they thought the devil responsible for all the beautiful things of the world?”

Too Simple

They all looked properly distressed. All except Father Hall, who laughed aloud.

“Of all the easy things in the world, and the false ones, I know nothing compared to linking together Hindu fakirs and Prohibitionists and saints and Puritans and fathers of the desert all in one sentence.”

“But they belong there,” cried the professor almost angrily. “They all hated the world because it was beautiful. They were all convinced that the visible world, the things that delight the eyes and ears and palate, were of the devil and essentially bad.”

“Not the saints and fathers of the desert,” said the priest.

“Well, didn’t they go around preaching penance? Didn’t they have Lents of seventy days instead of forty? Didn’t they get excited and scared out of their wits when they saw people having a good time? Look at Savanarola.”

“A great man, but not a saint,” interrupted the priest.

“They were beauty haters. And their spirit still rules over your Christian Lent.”

Dr. Allenby was quite angry, and he said that in no mere conversational tone.

Mrs. Bradley gathered herself to spring conversationally into the ring and separate the two contestants. But she was not as quick as the priest. To her relief, though, his voice was pleasantly calm and his manner totally unruffled.

Beauty Lovers

“Again, I say, not Catholic saints, not fathers of the desert. The precise point missed by people who failed to understand the saints in this: Saints, perhaps more than other men in the world, understood beauty. They were the great lovers of beauty. They thought the world was all so marvellous that only God deserved to have it for His own.”

“Bosh!” said Dr. Allenby, rudely. And then he had the good grace to laugh at himself. “Sorry, Father. I’ve been terribly rude. But really, I haven’t your gift of playing with words. I’m not a Jesuit.”

“Neither am I,” said Father Hall, “and believe me, I’m not playing with words at all. I’m playing with hard facts back

of a human phenomenon. I'm talking about the very thing that makes the Christian ascetic—whether a hermit in the desert or a shop-girl giving up a strawberry sundae at noon, or a nun keeping silence from twelve to three o'clock on Good Friday, or a business man refusing to put salt in his soup, though a dash of salt would vastly improve it—different from all the others you talked about. To the Christian, the world is too, too beautiful. It isn't evil. It's lovely. That is why one has to be careful what one does with it."

A Worthy Gift

"I don't understand you at all," said Shirley Green.

"Too deep for me, and I'm supposed to be a Catholic," chimed in Grace Melville, feeling that the priest was talking just a little like the ghost of Chesterton.

He saw he had to explain.

"In the first place, remember that a Christian does not merely renounce unless the thing is wrong or a matter of sin. He renounces in the sense of giving to God. Now, nobody would insult a friend by giving him something that he thought was evil or ugly or that he himself didn't like. A lover doesn't walk up to his ladylove and say, 'Of course, I know this is a bunch of milkweed, and nettles; but because the horrible bouquet is so hideous, I am giving it to you.' That's not a gift or a sacrifice; that's an insult. A man doesn't say to his friend: 'Here, you take this steak I ordered. The darn thing is tainted and, anyhow, I don't like steak.' 'Here's my dog. It's got a vicious temper; I suspect it's infected with rabies, and it will probably bite you and the children; but please accept it with my compliments.'

"So the Christian wouldn't offer God the sacrifice of something which he regarded as ugly or vicious or worthless or belonging to the devil. No; the Christian ascetic renounces because he realises that the world is so glorious that only God can rightly wear its jewels upon His hand; only God can rightly enjoy the world's great music; only God who painted the great landscapes of earth can properly appreciate them."

Too Lovely

"Frankly," said Grace, recurring once more to that unpleasant word, "I can't but feel that it is a little daft."

"To want to give the God you love the loveliest things in the world? That is what a man wants to do to the woman he loves. That is what a mother does for her child. But we are not through; no, not quite yet. There's another aspect."

They all sat looking at the priest intently. He was being very casual about it all, but very emphatic.

"The Christian who gives up the beautiful thing is likely to be proving conclusively that he entertains the highest appreciation for them and the keenest knowledge both of the things and of himself."

"That," said Dr. Allenby, with a touch of irony, "is undoubtedly an amazing statement."

Panegyric

"Then let me paraphrase the process that lies back of Christian penance and renunciation. Says the saint: 'O Lord, if anything, you made the world too beautiful. It is too compellingly sweet. It is too filled with beautiful music and lovely landscapes and charming people and the sound of laughter and the glittering of jewels and strength and grace and power. Friendship is almost too sweet. Music is too enthralling. Jewels are too fascinating. Wealth is too powerful. Eloquence is too persuasive. Food is so varied and delicious that I find myself inclined to be a glutton. There is too much of warmth and fire in wine,'

"He sums up the world in a kind of ecstatic panegyric.

But Men

"Then he turns to history, and he sees clearly that, because the world is so glorious and beautiful, men have made it their god. They have found the world so lovely that they did not need, they thought, to go the step further and find its Creator. Worse, they became so enraptured with it that they committed all sorts of crimes in order to claim it for

themselves. They murdered the man who stood between them and the jewel that fascinated them. They lusted after the woman whose face and figure enthralled them. They robbed others, grew frightfully selfish, clung to perishable and destructive objects out of their complete absorption in the visible world.

“The trouble with the world was not that it was ugly, but that it was so terribly beautiful and so overwhelmingly fascinating that it made men forget everything else and sell their souls and their honour and time and eternity to possess even some small portion of it.

Untrustworthy

“Logically, the Christian went the next step. He said to himself: ‘I wonder how far I can trust myself with this beautiful world? Am I sure that I won’t become greedy and selfish, too? Will I some day be willing to steep my hands in blood or my body in lust to get possession of one of those lovely things? Am I trustworthy enough to be let loose in this glorious treasure house that God has made?’

“Being shrewdly honest about himself, his answer was no. He distrusted himself, first because he had seen stronger men and women than himself go astray, misled by the beauty that fills the world, and made weak by the compelling attraction of God’s beautiful creatures; and then because he feels he is personally neither strong nor trustworthy. He is a little like a child turned loose in a candy shop, apt to gorge himself to violent sickness. He is somewhat like a man with an inclination to kleptomania left alone in an unguarded jewellery shop. He is a chap with sticky fingers suddenly back of the cashier’s window. He isn’t sure of himself. He knows the world is gloriously beautiful. But he is afraid that he is pitifully weak.

“Perhaps the only thing in God’s creation that the saint really condemns is himself. Certainly his attitude is that he is the one weak thing in all God’s glorious world. It is consequently his business to see that he learns to master himself.

Schooling Oneself

“So he schools himself not to gorge, by giving up even legitimate sweets. He masters his inclination to steal, by refusing to accept even what he is allowed to touch. He makes himself trustworthy, by learning to restrain his hands and steel his will. He gives up and renounces, he fasts and does penance, not in a spirit of contempt of God’s creation, but in a spirit of self-distrust.

“Personally, I can’t but feel he is a fairly wise and logical person. He is paying a tremendous compliment to the world God has made; and he is training his will so that the beauty of the world, which has misled so many, won’t ever make of him a murderer, a thief, an adulterer, a man of dishonesty or greed or lust.”

Father Hall paused. Then he smiled and spread his hands in a kind of embarrassed gesture.

“That’s all. But don’t you think that makes the saint very much different from any of the other so-called ascetics of the world.”

Interruption

Mrs. Harrison roused herself again.

“What’s this,” she demanded, “got to do with Lent? I’m no father of the desert.”

“You’re a dear grandmother, and we’re so glad that you are in our living room,” smiled Mrs. Bradley.

But the old lady declined to be flattered.

“We start on Lent and then we go to Manicheans and we end up being fathers of the desert. I wish people nowadays could carry on a conversation without straying over the whole inhabited earth. What’s the connection?”

Self-Training

“Tell her, Father,” said Bradley, taking a penultimate sip of his brandy.

“Only this, Mrs. Harrison, that during Lent we imitate the saints just a little. We train ourselves to give up the good

things of the world just to prove that we can. Good things have a way of mastering us. Good living and good food and good drink, riches and comfort and amusements, have a way of making men slaves. God meant us to enjoy them. He never meant them to be a substitute for Himself. Nor did He mean them to make us so weakly greedy that we would do anything, even commit sin, rather than be without them.

“Lent comes, and we give up some of our good food, some of our good times, some of our leisure and recreation, just to prove that we can be trusted. We master them for a few brief weeks so that they may not master us for life. We give up voluntarily so that we may not be held slaves. We lay aside deliberately, so that we may resume those lovely gifts of God, not because we are slaves of habit, but of our own free will. We give up our glass of brandy so that drink may never hold us captive. We give up the theatre so that we may not be slaves of a good time. We abstain from food, not merely because we want to prove that we are masters even of what we eat and drink, but because we want to test our wills.

“If we can’t give up a steak, are we sure we could give up some powerful temptation? If we can’t conquer our appetite for a big luncheon, could we be trusted to conquer our appetite for some forbidden person? If we can’t get along without an egg for breakfast, are we sure we could hold back our hand from a jewel which we could take and no one be the wiser? Lent is a time when we prove ourselves trustworthy. More than that; if Lent is well carried through, it is a time when we make ourselves trustworthy.

Just for God?

“Do you see the connection, Mrs. Harrison?”

But Mrs. Harrison’s rumble in her throat may have been an indication of assent or a sign that she had long since ceased to regard the whole business as of any importance.

Miss Green was off on another tack.

“Then ultimately this whole matter of Lenten observance is for the sake of God. We want to give God something; is that it? We are keen to prove to Him that we are sufficiently trustworthy to be left as night-watchmen, so to speak, in His treasure house. We won’t steal—see? We have taught ourselves not even to take our salary. We won’t gorge ourselves. Watch, I can say no when I’m passed a chicken sandwich, even though it’s twenty-four hours since my last meal. It’s all a matter of impressing God.”

Grace Melville secretly admired Shirley Green. She was known to be a young woman who was making a name for herself in the advertising world. She was a graduate of a swank Eastern college, and already was earning more than many a bank’s first vice-president; and she had a suave scepticism about her that amused Grace. Sometimes Grace told herself that as a Catholic she ought to resent Shirley’s acid comments, Perversely, she found herself silently and secretly cheering them on.

Another Life

Father Hall felt that he had missed something. He really thought that he had been stressing the good that renunciation did to a man’s character and will. Evidently he hadn’t. He tried a new angle.

“Did you ever hear of the supernatural life?”

“No,” replied Shirley and Dr. Allenby.

“Yes,” simultaneously replied the rest.

“I’m sure you have,” said Father Hall, “though the words may sound unfamiliar.” He paused, groping for new words. “Besides a body, we have a soul, that lives an existence of its own, and is destined for an eternal existence beyond this life.”

“A sort of astral body?” Shirley was now frankly mocking. She had caught the admiration in Grace’s eyes.

“No; nothing like it.” The priest looked through her and she knew he was just a little bored and a trifle disgusted with her flippancy. She had the grace to feel ashamed.

“Sorry, I was being smart,” she apologised. “Yes, I understand what you mean by the life of the soul.”

Two Diets

“Well, we Catholics are tremendously impressed with the importance of the supernatural life. We believe that it is given to us in baptism, and that it can be developed, trained, matured, lost, regained, deepened; that it can be sickened and restored to health; that it can be extremely weak and powerfully vigorous. It is analogous in a remarkable degree to the life of the body.

“Now, one of the big instrumentalities of modern medicine in its care of the body is diet.”

“And fasting.” Mrs. Bradley was on sure ground. “Do you know, there’s a doctor here in town that all the women are mad about. He starts them off by letting them eat practically nothing for three days. And it does the most incredible things to their complexions. And before he gets through, what he has done to their figure,—”

Fasting for Beauty

“Made ‘em look like skeletons wrapped in loose parchment,” growled her husband.

Mrs. Harrison emerged again.

“When I was a little girl, it was a disgrace to look like your family couldn’t afford to keep you. When I was married, I weighed one hundred and forty-five pounds, and padded all over for fear my young man would think me skinny. I don’t know what’s come over the women, thinking that men are going to fall in love with a skeleton in chiffon.”

She submerged.

“Sounds like an old Turkish empress, doesn’t she?” whispered Grace. They all nodded wordlessly.

“You were saying?” prompted Mrs. Bradley. “For a minute I was afraid Mrs. Harrison was going to make it impossible for me to make a case for dieting,” said the priest.

“Eat what you like and when you like,” murmured the old lady. “I weigh one hundred and eighty, and if it wasn’t for an occasional attack of indigestion and this infernal foot of mine...”

They sat silently, until they felt she had slipped across the threshold of consciousness.

“Behold!” said the priest, with the slightest gesture of his hand in the old lady’s direction. “Overweight, indigestion, gout, and sleepiness. Good argument for dieting, don’t you think?”

They shook understanding heads.

Over-Eating

“It has often been a wonder to me,” Father Hall continued, “how some of our ancestors lived. Did you ever see Hogarth’s picture of the Lord Mayor of London’s dinner? Every guest with a whole chicken, a round of beef, a leg of lamb, a suet pudding, a loaf of bread, and a gallon jug of ale. No wonder our ancestors developed their incredible equators, their paunches that overflowed straight from their chins to their knees, their gout, their high blood pressure, their apoplexy, their rheumatism, their sudden deaths.

“Your modern doctor insists on diet, fasting, watchfulness regarding rich food, much more than he insists on medicines or even on exercise. A man who is a drunkard is physically ill. A glutton is heading for a stroke. A woman who plunges into rich food is playing hob with her figure and her health. Red meats may be eaten with moderation. The old breakfasts, where a man sat down to two pounds of cold roast beef, a ring of sausages, a loaf of black bread, and two quarts of beer, would be regarded today as little less poisonous than arsenic on toast.

Body and Soul

“And, as Mrs. Bradley suggested, all sorts of cures now begin with complete fasts. All sorts of diets banish meats and sweets altogether.

“That’s why, many years ago, Mr. Dooley recorded a famous argument between Father Kelly and Doc Grogan, both of Archy Road.

“Lent is good for the soul,” said Father Kelly.

“Lent is good for the body,” said old Doc. Grogan.

“And they were both right.”

The entire roomful laughed, and Mrs. Harrison laughed a little uncertainly, not having heard the discussion, but being aroused by the laughter it evoked.

“It’s odd,” said Father Hall, meditatively, “how modern medicine has only caught up with what the Church has long commanded and commended. I wonder, considered merely as a practice of health, if the Lenten fast, with its cutting down of meat, its eliminating of one heavy meal and consequent rest to the digestive tract, its paring off of sweets and tobacco and liquor, isn’t exactly what many a doctor would order as an excellent thing for a modern man or woman.”

“He might at that,” said Mr. Bradley, suddenly pulling his hand back as it had started to reach out for the brandy bottle.

But Father Hall was not urging an argument; he was merely thinking aloud.

Fast Souls

“That, however, is not the point. Our souls get fatty, no doubt of it. They tend to get lazy, and easy-going and well fed. Any sort of self-indulgence is bad for the character. Virtues grow slack with easy ways of life. A pampered body usually houses a slack soul. A body grown fat, because it is richly dined and warmly wined, is likely to drag along with it a soul that has little of virtue and less of heroism.

“A man certainly grows spiritually stronger as he masters his appetites, whatever they are. If he always reaches out his hand for whatever pleases his eye or stimulates his palate, he finds his will getting flabby and inert. A completely masterful man is a man who can say to himself and to all his faculties, ‘Do’ or ‘Don’t’ or ‘Stop’ or ‘Continue’ and be sure of immediate obedience.

Or Leave It Alone

“Remember always that giving up food in Lent is almost a sort of symbol. Food is not the important thing, either the taking or the leaving of it. But the ability to take it or leave it, that’s important. The grit required to push aside a tempting dish may be the test of one’s strength of soul. The power to drive one’s body ahead when it is annoyingly insistent on food is a test of strength of will.”

Mr. Bradley grinned.

“I’ve never heard a fellow brag about drink (that he could take it or leave it alone) whoever left it alone. He could take it, all right, But when he started bragging about being able to leave it alone, it was a ten-to-one shot that he couldn’t leave it alone any more.”

He picked up the bottle and walked with it across the room, laying it down with an emphatic thud in the centre of the table. He turned and eyed his friends sternly.

“I call your attention to the fact that I made no boasts. But I trust that actions speak louder than words.”

And they all applauded him and cheered in mock encouragement.

Symbol

“If food is only a symbol,” Mrs. Bradley asked, “is that why the Church has excused most people from fasting during Lent?”

Father Hall hesitated.

“The Church is convinced,” he said at last, “that we live in difficult times. We are not the robust race that once pioneered through a tough, hard world. We are not used to cold houses and meals taken when we could get them. We are more nervous; doing more brain work in the main and exposed to the peculiar illness of civilisation. That is why the Church is quite lenient about its dispensations. It does not want any of its laws to be a burden or cause a man physical harm.”

“I’m rather inclined to agree with you,” said Dr. Allenby, in a sudden change of front, “that a certain amount of actual dieting, fasting, and abstaining would do us all a lot of good. I could wish that the Church would not get too lenient.”

Too Lenient

“I only wish that the Church could be half as effective in making its followers fast and abstain as the beauty specialists are when they deal with our ladies. I’d hate to put one of my penitents on the diet thousands of women are taking to keep their weight under one hundred and thirty.”

“And what we’ll give up to keep our complexions clear!” agreed Mrs. Bradley.

“Let’s hope the Church doesn’t get too lenient.” Dr. Allenby persisted in being the full-fledged convert. Father Hall restrained any look of surprise. If the professor was won over by the logic of Lent....

“I was thinking,” said their host once more, “of the diets and abstinences that athletes go through when they are in training.”

Training

Father Hall nodded.

“I’ve often used that as an argument with young men,” he said. “I’ve pointed out how, before a fight, fighters eat nothing for twenty-four hours. And we are fighting with the powers of darkness for the eternal crown. I’ve reminded them how football players in training give up smoking and sweets and pork and certain starches. I’ve shown them the connection between correct dieting and winning Olympic championships. And we, in the words of St. Paul, run for a great prize.

“We are spiritual athletes. Our Lent is a time of spiritual training. Our Lenten diet is our spiritual training table. We’ve a hard contest ahead. We’ve bold and aggressive and well-trained adversaries to conquer. We have to be in training. We must be careful that we are not fat and flabby and full of rich food and debilitating drink.”

How It Started

“But I thought you said that food was just a symbol?” Shirley Green could not resist a last mild jibe.

“And so I did. I suppose the Church chose food because, at the time when Lent was established, really good Catholics had not much else to give up. They could not go to the pagan theatres, anyhow; they either did not exist or were filthy and places of frank sin. The parties of the Christians were more likely to be religious Love Feasts (the lovely Agapes) than dances or bridges. Luxuries were for the rich, and luxuries had not at that time been placed within easy reach of everyone. A child who had a peach or a ripe fig was tasting a delicacy comparable to a modern two-pound box of candy. But food was universal, naturally. And food could be curtailed. Food, therefore, became the accepted symbol and passed into Church law. Anyhow, abstinence from food was hallowed by the ancient practice of holy men of all religions, and was blessed by the example of Christ’s fast.

The Spirit

“It was, however, the spirit back of the renunciation that was really important. Men did not fast because it was a time of sorrow for sin. They were preparing by their voluntary penance for the terrible passion and death that Christ was to undergo during Holy Week. Their abstinence from food was a sort of reparation to Christ for His torturing thirst upon the Cross. They could not be glad when Christ was facing death. And they were offering something to God for the gift of His Son going to death for sinful men.

“Now that spirit must go on. Fasting has been more readily dispensed. The spirit of sorrow for sin, of apology for insult, of giving to Him something precious or difficult, is in no way changed. So it is important that little children be taught voluntarily to give up their candy as a gift to God. Dancing feet must be quieted because Christ’s feet drag along the Way of the Cross.

“All of us, as spiritual athletes, must go into training for the well-being of our souls, strengthening our will against the struggles that every man must meet, growing vigorous in body and spirit for the race toward heaven. And we must make ourselves and prove ourselves spiritually trustworthy. The world is so beautiful and so seductive that we are wise to test for ourselves how far it has mastered us and how far we have mastered it.

“It is the spirit of Lent that matters.”

Hard Things

Mrs. Harrison heaved herself up heavily.

“Now, what are you all talking about?” she demanded.

“Lent,” replied her hostess. “Lent begins on Wednesday, and we were all discussing...”

The old lady forgot her former statement and made a face.

“I hate Lent,” she said.

Father Hall shrugged his shoulders as they all looked at him and laughed.

“Thus speaks the voice of nature,” he said. “But then how few things that are really good for us are easy to take—visits to the dentist, exercise, work, spinach, cold baths, early rising, practicing the piano....”

And they let it go at that.

Nihil Obstat:

F. Moynihan,
Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur:

* D. Mannix,
Archiepiscopus Melbournensis.
