

Text for the Times:

The Right Use of Fasting

Christian penance, broadly speaking, may have two basic motives. First, and less attractively, it may be an ascetic instrument towards an individualist perfection, the negative side of an effort to allow the new life of grace to take hold of one's own personality. Secondly, it may be an identification with Christ in his sufferings, but not merely with the sufferings of Christ in his own life on earth; it must, to be fully actualised in the world, be an identification with Christ suffering in the members of his Body here and now, with the homeless, the hungry and the deprived of whatever race or religion. And it must find its full expression not in the denial of the Christian who practises it, but in the gift he can make as a result of it. As St Augustine says in the sermon translated below; 'Here you are, doing yourself out of things; who are you going to give it to?'

A Sermon on Psalm 42 by St Augustine

This is a short psalm; so it will do nicely for satisfying eager minds without being irksome to fasting stomachs. May it provide food for our soul, which is said to be sad, according to the man who is speaking in this psalm; sad, I think, because of some fast of his – or rather of some hunger, since fasting is something you do on purpose, while being hungry just happens to you. And the Church is hungry, the body of Christ is hungry, that man who is spread all over the world, his head up above and his limbs and members down below. It is his voice which should be as well known and familiar to us as our own. Indeed we should recognise it as our own in all the psalms, whether carolling gaily or groaning wearily, rejoicing in hope of future gladness or sighing in experience of present sadness. I need not, then, spend any more time in explaining who is speaking; let each of us only be in the body of Christ, and each one of us will be speaking here. . .

Why are you sorrowful, my soul, and why do you trouble me? Is it, perhaps, because a wholly blameless life is difficult indeed to find or achieve? Even though other men can find nothing to fault in a man's life, God who knows how to judge to the nearest hair's breadth will certainly find something to reprove. Perhaps this is what the soul is afraid of, and is therefore troubled and anxious. So the mind, rising superior to the soul, addresses it, as though to say: Why be afraid of sins, just because you can't avoid them all? *Hope in God, for I will*

confess to him. Certainly be afraid, if you call yourself a just man ; if you do not make your own the words of another psalm : *Enter not into judgment with your servant* (Ps 142, 2). Why not enter into judgment with your servant ? Because I need your mercy ; if you give judgment without mercy, where shall I be ? *Enter not into judgment with your servant, because in your sight shall no man living be justified.* So, if in your sight no man living shall be justified, woe to that man with whom God enters into judgment.

Do not then presume to strive with God in judgment. Do all you can to be just ; and however just you may manage to be, confess that you are a sinner and always hope for mercy. Then confident in this humble confession you can say to your anxious soul, restless and fretful within you, *Why are you sorrowful, my soul, and why do you trouble me ?* Perhaps you wanted to hope in yourself ? *Hope in God,* not in yourself. What are you in yourself, after all ? What are you by yourself ? Let him be your health who took upon himself your wounds. *Hope in the Lord,* he says, *for I shall confess to him* – What will you confess to him ? – *the salvation of my countenance, O, my God.* You are the salvation of my countenance, only you can save my face, only you can cure me. I speak to you as a sick man, I recognise the doctor, I don't boast that I am all right. As another psalm puts it, *I said, Lord have mercy on me ; cure my soul, because I have sinned against you* (Ps 40, 5).

That is a sound and sensible thing for us to say, brothers. But don't forget to be wide awake in doing good. *Break your bread to the hungry,* you heard Isaias saying (58, 7ff). Don't imagine fasting is enough. Fasting is good for you, but it doesn't help anyone else. Your tightening your own belt will be of profit if you thereby help another to loosen his. Here you are, doing yourself out of things ; who are you going to give it to, all this you have taken from yourself ? Where will you deposit what you have denied yourself ? How many poor people, brothers, could have a good feed on the dinners we are missing today ! Fast then in such a way that another man's eating gives you all the pleasure of dining, and in this way you will get your prayers listened to. As he goes on to say : *While you are still speaking, I will say Here am I ; if you break your bread with a will to the hungry* – because it is often done with a long face and a grumble merely to get rid of a beggar's tiresome whines, not to satisfy a needy man's empty stomach. But God loves a cheerful giver. If you give your bread away with a long face, you lose your bread and your merit together. So do it with a will, that he who sees inside may say while you are still speaking, Here am I. How quickly the prayers of people who do good get heard ! Three things go to a man's being good and just in this life – fasting, almsgiving, prayer. Do you want your prayer to fly to God ? Make it a pair of wings – fasting and almsgiving. May the light of God and the truth of God find us to be people of that

sort, find us therefore with nothing to worry about when *he* comes to deliver us from death who has already come once to endure death for our sakes. Amen.

Selected and translated by Edmund Hill, O.P.

1846 by Louise Mally

Margaret Fuller, Boston lady,
Margaret Fuller, blue stocking, famed
Visited, in shivering April,
St Peter's altars when twilight fell
And outside the sudden rain of the season
Swinged the pavements' reflected lights.
She watched the pinpoint holy candles,
Still as God on the altar's height
And thought of her years and her tired eyelids –
A maiden lady, but Boston's pride –
Her friends were somewhere. . . A mass, repeated,
A surge of feet – and her bones were tired.

Outside was rain, and she stood and waited,
Back to the great door, peering out
At the beat of rain on the long procession
Of pillared pavements. No cab was about
But a voice spoke gently at her elbow
Proffering, we remember, more,
Than the unfurled strength of his large umbrella,
And he took the lady to her door,
Having told her his name and his ancient title,
Having talked and talked as they walked in the rain;
And bearing his name and his ancient title
He found it prudent to explain
(For Miss Fuller mentioned 'Risorgimento'
And Italy surged in the wind of Rome)
'My father', he said, 'is in the service of Austria;
My brother', he said, 'is in the Papal Guard,
But I, Madame, am for the revolution'.
She gave him her hand; he had brought her home.