

The Holy Fast

and Its Desirable Fruit

During this season of Lent we are encouraged to pay attention to the importance of Christ's teaching to us through his parables and miracles, a topic Father Matta reflected on several times. Enjoy!

THE HOLY FAST is a season the Church has set in which to withdraw from the world and meet God, just as the Lord Jesus did when He returned from Jordan after baptism. He withdrew alone into the desert, away from the world for forty days of prayer and fighting the devil. During that period He did not eat a thing.

During this holy season the Church, through its readings, hymns and sermons, provides us with a spiritual atmosphere conducive to entering the inner seclusion of this time of withdrawal from the world in order to encounter first ourselves and then God.

How do we encounter ourselves?

It is difficult for a person to face up to himself truthfully whilst he is engaged in the normal daily activities of filling himself with food, talking incessantly and being busy with the trivial matters of life; pastimes, reading newspapers, going on outings, sleeping and visiting other people. So it is important that, during the Holy Fast, we cut out everything but the essentials in order to create the opportunity for inner withdrawal.

Inevitably we will find it difficult at the beginning as we reduce our food intake, opportunities for conversation and outings and the hours that we sleep. But from the beginning we badly need to realize that the difficulty arises for two reasons:

First: The power of habit, which is an easy matter to overcome.

Second: The soul's deep instinct to avoid this kind of withdrawal because it fears to face its own sinful nature. It desires to continue in debauchery and sinful pleasures. Over this second issue we need to deal firmly with ourselves and be alert to all the tame excuses we invent to evade reclusion and fasting.

But if a person succeeds in overcoming his habits, if his conduct is firm, sober and alert to the soul's excuses and procrastinations; if he provides himself with opportunities for tranquility, withdrawal and prayer, then he really has succeeded in entering the blessing of Lent and will reap the benefits of it.

The fruit of reclusion and self-awareness are many; the two most important are:

The First Fruit:

Discovering the extent of the loss we have suffered due to dullness, negligence and laziness in our spiritual life because of our frivolous outlook on life and because we missed the opportunities for seclusion and prayer.

We will prove to ourselves without anyone telling us how this loss has impoverished our lives and caused us to miss opportunities for spiritual development. It may even have led us into sin, setting our lives on a decline.

The most dangerous effect of dullness, neglect of prayer and spiritual laziness is that it leaves our hearts open to attack and we end up believing that we are unable to change and that there is no use in trying. Our thinking becomes deluded through the opportunity afforded by neglect and laziness. This delusion becomes a mind-set that undermines every prompting to change or seek renewal.

To discover at the very beginning of our fast that these things have in fact affected us is considered to be among the greatest benefits of reclusion and among the most desirable fruits of the Holy Fast. It is the discovery of a poisonous root that has been infecting the spiritual life bit by bit through carelessness, and it has grown bigger through loss of self confidence and faith in God. It hinders us in our struggle little by little as the days go by and leads us into despondency. The hopelessness which gains access through dullness, neglect and laziness is a field for the devil to play in. He will be free to roam, attack us and ultimately destroy every hope and salvation itself.

The Second Fruit:

Discovering the extent of sin and perversion that have attacked the spiritual aim for which we live. The reason is that any deviation from the path to the goal we are aiming for hinders our journey and throws us into difficulties. It brings complications in our imagination that are capable of blocking our way forward, no matter how successful we may appear to be to others. The ease with which we progress towards our goal depends on how clearly we see it. Our confidence, our hope, our courage and our power are in accordance with the truth of our aim and the sincerity with which we hold to it.

We do not have, and it is impossible to have, a true aim other than **Christ Himself**. **Christ is the aim** for which we live and die, as the prophet Isaiah says: “Thy memorial name is the desire of our soul, My soul yearns for thee in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks thee” (Isaiah 26:8, 9). If Christ is not the one we aim for in life with a clear, honest intent and a sincere heart, then the world itself will be our aim. Our aim will be our own greatness and pride, to increase our financial assets and to receive praise from men. If this, then our lives are exposed to evil and our way will be crooked. We will discover that our own will has become more important to me than God’s will, and we will always put it first. When God is no longer our desire, we desire instead our

own dignity, power and fortune! We will no longer be God-worshippers but will depend on others' salvation. We will make everything subject to ourselves because Christ is no longer the goal, only ourselves.

If we discover the extent of our deviation from our lives' aim we will have reaped the second fruit of reclusion. It is a very precious fruit and invaluable in that it will convince us to change our lives whatever the cost. When we see it, we will even go as far as to turn down opportunities to enhance our lives and have no regrets about it, just as St Isaac the Syrian rejected the bishopric of Nineveh when he discovered he had lost his true aim. He chose instead to be a recluse in the depth of the desert, and in so doing saved himself and hundreds of thousands of others through the generations.

How do we meet with God?

The revelation of the extent of the disintegration of our souls is, by itself, enough to bring us to God's door, to throw ourselves down in bitter remorse and contrition, prepared for true repentance. We will discover that there is no entrance into God's presence except through this door, the door of remorse and repentance! So just as we departed God's presence in ignorance through the door of spiritual negligence, we may now have the blessing of returning to Him through the door of remorse and repentance that is opened to us during reclusion! We will then face God in a state of great regret and shame, like Adam and Eve when, in their nakedness, they heard God's voice, having eaten the fruit of disobedience.

But God does not delight to see us naked! He wants to cover us, as the book of Revelation says, with the garment of His grace, in the same way that He covered Adam and Eve, according to the book of Genesis, in clothes of leather (Gen 3:21). Christ said to the angel of the Church in Laodicea: "Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen" (Rev 3:18). In the same way, our ignorance has exposed us naked and removed us from God through our dullness and dissolution, but His Grace covers us when we return to His presence in repentance.

The fruits of meeting with God during reclusion are numerous, but the most important are these:

The First Fruit:

A serious spiritual outlook on life, knowing the great importance of salvation, being continuously diligent, careful and alert to any deviation, wantonness or impurity! These are the most important and greatest fruits we reap during reclusion. They will be faithful companions to us on life's journey, supplying us with the motivation and power to finish the race!

This desirable fruit is not one that we make with our own hands; it is not a cooked food! It is one that will be given to all God's children who have repented and returned

to Him in truth and sincerity. It is a blessing that comes from God after we have become completely convinced that no hope or salvation can come without it. A sincere conviction of our need for this fruit and a passionate desire to possess it are the only qualifications required to own it! It is the fruit on the tree of life desired in truth. The truth of its desirability is that which makes it fall into our hands!

The Second Fruit:

This is the fruit of Divine love. In reclusion we imprison ourselves in the field of Divine love. When we encounter ourselves and discover our ingratitude and immorality; when we bring ourselves to be judged thoroughly and honestly in God's presence and when, with the dust of remorse on our heads, we weep over the time we spent in ignorance and repent sincerely before the Lord, the energies of His love are released in us. He cannot bear to withhold His love from those returning to Him from far away (Lk 15:11-32). He wipes away our tears with His hands and onto our bitter sadness He applies the ointment of the joy of salvation that exceeds all our companions. Whilst we are still telling Him about the extent of our ingratitude, immorality and ignorance, He is already, in secret, preparing the banquet for His wedding. We speak of our ingratitude, and His reply to us is salvation. We groan under the weight of our ingratitude, and He groans under the weight of His love! God continues to press his love on us until all our weakness is overcome and the burning tears of repentance are transformed into bright tears of joy and delight at eternal salvation. The greatest fruit of reclusion that has always been there for us, and always will, is the fruit of Divine love. It is the fuel of eternity, the fire the Lord casts upon the desolation of earth that changes our misery into eternal joy in a mystery unrealized except by the repentant.

Lent is the season for the soul to return to its true rest: "Return, O my soul, to your rest" (Ps 116:7). The hymns we sing during Lent are a call to those who are asleep, wandering in the ways of sin and floundering in the gulf of perdition. They call them to wake up, to be enlightened and to return because it is the time of repentance, the time of salvation, an acceptable time, a time of light not of darkness. The Church is the bride adorned with the Holy Spirit. In it those who have returned in repentance from the distant land meet to eat and drink at the banquet and to receive from the bridegroom the mystery of salvation. They bask in the comfort of Christ's embrace; they cling to Him and let Him lead them wherever He goes. They listen to His words of love and become His lovers. They love nothing other than Him until death, not even their own lives! Was it not written in ancient times that love is more powerful than death (Song 8:6)? Who else but lovers know this to be true?

Christ manifests His full stature in the Church. The Spirit in her forms the full stature of Christ and in us forms baptism, the cross and the resurrection. In Lent the Church gives to its children the figure of Christ's fasting and reclusion, the mystery of His isolation from the world and forsaking of human company; His relatives, friends and even his disciples. It is a mystery that He abandoned the world for the world's sake; that He renounced all for the sake

of saving all! It is the same mystery expressed in fasting and denying one's soul and body for the sake of saving the soul and body!

Christ did not spend forty days alone in the desert for His own sake. He was not fasting for Himself because we are told that He did so already filled with the Holy Spirit having returned from the Jordan. If He was already filled with the Holy Spirit and was never not filled with the Holy Spirit, He did not need to make a journey into the desert, to go into seclusion, to fast and pray for his own benefit. It was the whole of humanity journeying in and through Him! Christ the man took every man with Him, in Him, that humanity might enter with Him into seclusion from itself and from the world that leads it astray. There he offered humanity to God away from the desires of the flesh, and of the eyes, and the glorification of the living. When a man's flesh is deliberately denied food, drink, rest and the craving of every other appetite, in a desolate desert without any comfort for the flesh, it awakens the soul to its true desire for God. It makes it look towards God's heaven, which is its true country, to be satisfied with the comforts of eternity instead of earthly food.

Through Christ, humanity has been allowed to experience seclusion, fasting and self-denial as a basic stage in the progress from baptism to the cross and resurrection. During Lent the Church ministers this same mystery, the mystery of the experience of seclusion and the testing of fasting and self-denial. It is the mystery Christ fulfilled for us and blesses us with. During Lent the Spirit makes available to us all that Christ gained by His victory over the devil through the battles with the desires of the flesh, the eyes and the glory of the world. He ministers to us the fulfillment of an important and basic stage in the formation of Christ's stature in us. This stage is a preparation for the greatest mystery, the mystery of the cross, which in turn leads to the greatest fullness, the fullness of resurrection!

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