

Notes By The Way - March 1944

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Summary: Her theme is food in the scriptures, fasting, unnecessary desires, factory food against the backdrop of the Lenten observance of fasting as a way to freedom. (DDLW #399).

I began to write this article on the Feast of our Lady of Lourdes when I went to my bookshelves to find something about our Blessed Mother to read. I picked up two books, opened them for a bit and closed them both with horror and sat down with my missal instead. I'm not going to mention the names of the two books nor their authors. I'd prefer to talk of the splendid hagiography of Fr. Thurston and Donald Attwater (the revised Butler), Gheon, Ida Coudenhove, Margaret Monroe and other modern writers.

In the first of the two books aforementioned, the saint-writer declares that the Blessed Mother, with lighted torches, was seen setting fire to a dance hall, where couples were carousing, and burning it to the ground with 400 people therein! The second book had a little chapter about eating: "The saints went to their meals sighing. St. Alphonsus, when sitting down, would think only of the suffering of the souls in purgatory, and with tears would beseech Our Lady to accept the mortifications he imposed upon himself during meals. Blessed de Montford sometimes shed tears and sobbed bitterly when sitting at table to eat. If such have been the feelings of the saints what shall we say of those of Mary? St. Jerome (in a letter to Heliodorus) said that this wonderful child only took, toward evening, the food which an angel was wont to bring her."

No wonder no one wants to be a saint. But we are called to be saints—we are the sons of God! Thank God for the missal! I turned for refreshment to the Mass for the day.

Springtime

"The flowers have appeared in our land, the time of pruning is come." (That is literally true. Down here on Long Island they have been pruning the fruit trees and grapevines the early part of the month.) "Arise, my love, my beautiful one and come; my dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the wall. Show me thy face, let thy voice sound in my ears, for thy voice is sweet and thy face comely."

Filled with joy at this so different address to the Mother of Christ, I went on reading that chapter in the Canticle of Canticles. "Behold my beloved speaketh to me: Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come. For winter is now past, the rain is over and

gone. The fig tree hath put forth her green figs; the vines are in flower with their sweet smell. Arise my love, my beautiful one and come. Catch us, the littler foxes, that destroy the vines.”

The little foxes, it is about the little foxes I wish to write, the little foxes that destroy the beautiful vines that prevent the grapes from coming to fruition. In other words, the little misconceptions of feastings and fastings that keep us from rejoicing in true devotion during this season of Lent.

In the Mass of this very day there were two prayers, begging for “health both of soul and of body” and “that physical and moral health which we desire.” I want to write about feastings and fasting and the joys and beauties of body, because, although this is a feast day on which I begin this writing, the Septuagesima season has begun and we begin to gear ourselves for Lent.

How much there was about food in the Old Testament. Adam raised food for himself and Eve, and did it with pleasure. After the fall of Adam, ploughing and seeding and harvesting, earning one’s daily bread either as a husbandman like Cain or shepherd like Abel, was a difficult and painful affair. Sacrifices of food were offered to the Lord, whether of beasts, or of bread and wine—food because it represented our life—what we live by. We offered our lives to the Lord. We also lust after food as Esau did when he sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. The Israelites complained of their food in the desert and yearned after the flesh pots of Egypt even with the bondage and slavery it entailed, even though the Lord fed them bread from heaven and water from the Rock, food that had every delight and taste.

Who can forget the widow’s cruse of oil which was never diminished; Ruth gleaning in the corn; Daniel and his three companions living on “oats, pea beans and barley corn”; and the meal that was served Daniel in the lion’s den by the prophet Zacharias? St. Bonaventure said that after the long fast of our Lord in the desert, when the angels came to minister to Him, they went first to the blessed Mother to see what she had on her stove, and got the soup she had prepared and transported it to our Lord, Who relished it the more because His Mother had prepared it. Of course.

Fasting

How many times fasting is enjoined in the Old Testament. Whenever there was war, a penalty for their sins, the Jews were told to fast, and to fast joyfully, not with long faces. Over and over again the chosen people were urged to do penance, to fast, even their cattle, not only as a sign of sorrow for sins, and offering to God of their life, but also to have the means to show their love for their brother, who was afflicted.

How shall we have the means to help our brother who is in need? We can do without those unnecessary things which become habits, cigarettes, liquor, coffee, tea, candy, sodas, soft drinks, and those foods at meals which only titillate the palate. We all have these habits, the youngest and the oldest. And we have to die to ourselves in order to live, we have to put off the old man and put on Christ. That it is so hard, that it arouses so much opposition, serves to show what an accumulation there is in all of us of unnecessary desires.

The Way to Freedom

Instead of quoting Fr. Lacouture or Fr. Hugo, I'd like to quote Fr. Zossima, that very much alive character in Dostoievsky's *Brothers Karamazov*:

"The world says, you have desires, and so satisfy them, for you have the same rights as the most rich and powerful. Don't be afraid of satisfying them and even multiply your desires. I knew one champion of freedom who told me himself that, when he was deprived of tobacco in prison, he was so wretched at the privation that he almost went and betrayed his cause for the sake of getting tobacco again! And such a man says, 'I am fighting for the cause of humanity.'

"How can such a one fight, what is he fit for? He is capable perhaps of some action quickly over, but he cannot hold out long. And it is no wonder that the people instead of gaining freedom have sunk to slavery and instead of serving the cause of brotherly love and the union of humanity, have fallen on the contrary, into dissension and isolation."

"The monastic way is very different. Obedience, fasting and prayer are laughed at, yet only through them lies the way to real, true freedom."

And Feasting

I have always meant to go through the New Testament to see how many times food is mentioned, how many times Christ dined, supped, picnicked with His disciples. He healed St. Peter's mother-in-law and she rose to serve them. He brought the little girl back to life and said, "Give her to eat." He broiled fish on the seashore for His apostles. Could it possibly be that Mary was less solicitous for the happiness and comfort and refreshment of others?

It is a part of woman's life to be preoccupied with food. She nurses her child, she has nourished him for nine long months in her womb; it is her grief if her breasts fail her; she weeps if her child refuses to eat. Her work as food provider is her pleasure and her pain, pain because of the monotony and because right now the cost of food has gone up 43 per cent.

There are many ways to write about the problem of food. The heretical attitude of mind which feels shame of the body, disgust at its functions, distaste at supplying its necessities, fear of its joys, has resulted in a most exaggerated attention to food. First we neglect it because we think of eating as a gross pleasure. Then we lose interest in preparing foods for the family, then we turn to store and factory foods with all their talk of vitamins and calories.

Books on Health

From the standpoint of health, there are two good books which stimulate many thoughts on food. Dr. Price's *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration*, and Alexis Carel's *Man the Unknown*. We eat to have strength in order to serve God. If there are pleasures of taste to oil the heavy labor of production, we should take them gratefully from the good God. I'm sure the Blessed

Mother did not neglect her family duties. I am sure St. Joseph provided a good piece of wood which Mary kept scrubbed and perhaps waxed, and she who “with her bosom’s milk didst feed her own Creator, Lord most high,” must have seen to it that suitable meals were served on that board to Him who was like unto us in all things save only sin.

I have been getting the idea as to what was eaten in those days by what is eaten now by people in the same region. Reviewing a book for the Commonweal, “In the Footsteps of Moses,” led me to T. E. Lawrence, and then to Doughty’s Arabia Deserta. At the same time I was reading Bazin’s life of Fr. Charles de Foucauld. And, of course, the Desert Fathers.

Wheat, butter and honey, dates, wine and oil, mutton, calves, fish and quail—these are all mentioned in the Bible. Aside from feasts there was a monotony of diet that we should get back to for the sake of simplifying our lives, for the sake of being more truly poor with Him, for the sake of fasting, and for the sake of health. A handful of ground wheat with honey and milk on it makes a most delightful collation. A slice of whole wheat bread makes a fast day breakfast. You can buy a sack of wheat, a hundred pounds, for \$3. You can live this way in city or country. Not only this is war time, but this is Lent, and Lent is a wonderful time to begin again.

The Pope Said:

Back in May, 1741, Pope Benedict XIV said: “If this observance of Lent comes to be relaxed it is to the detriment of God’s glory, to the dishonor of the Catholic religion, and to the peril of souls; nor can it be doubted that such negligence will become a source of misfortune to nations, of disaster in public affairs, and of adversity to individuals.”

As in the days of the Old Testament, that prophecy of Pope Benedict XIV has come true with us.