

Rules for Eating

Gemma Simmonds CJ

Lenten fasting is a popular topic of conversation at this time of year, in secular as well as religious circles. But does giving something up for six weeks each year really have any spiritual value, or is it just a diet dressed up as a religious practice? Gemma Simmonds CJ explains that the purpose of a restraint of the appetite was an important question even for St Ignatius, so much so that his *Spiritual Exercises* contain the little-known 'Rules With Regard To Eating'.

This Lent I have been struck by the number of articles and conversations I have engaged with on the subject of giving things up, especially in the food line. Some writers remark on how people they know who have given up all other practices of religion continue to observe some sort of Lenten fast. Others looking from a secular perspective at the problem of non-sustainable consumption decide that maybe the Christians have a point. Still more disagree altogether. 'Where's the real spiritual benefit or meaning in all of this?', asks a philosopher colleague, who is never short of a killer question backed up by the sort of relentless thinking that has me reaching for the migraine tablets. 'It's like a sort of reverse Christmas, where people look forward to getting all these goodies. Except for Lent they give up whatever it is they really like, safe in the knowledge that in six weeks time they can go back and stuff their faces. In fact it probably makes them indulge even more, because during the six weeks they'll have lost a bit of weight and given their liver a chance to recover so they don't need to worry about the consequences. It's like a fad diet followed by compensation'.

It is not an unreasonable observation and tackles a highly topical subject. In the last decade, deaths from liver disease in the UK have risen by around 25%. 90% of those deaths occurred among the under-70s and many of them among the under-40s. In the prison where I volunteer there are more people



servicing life sentences for murders committed under the influence of alcohol than under the influence of drugs. We are binge drinking ourselves and other people to death. We are also eating ourselves to death. Statistics show that over 60% of adults and 30% of children are overweight: 1 in 4 adults in England are classified as obese, with as many as 30,000 people dying prematurely every year from obesity-related conditions. 'The road of excess leads

to the palace of wisdom', says William Blake in his *Proverbs of Hell*, '[...] You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough'. The trouble, it seems, is that we don't know what is more than enough, or if we do, we cannot or will not do anything about it. If the road of excess does in any way lead to the palace of wisdom, the danger is that we will be too inebriated to walk straight and too fat to fit through the doorway once we get there.

So is my philosopher friend right in thinking that the Lenten fast is mostly pointless as a spiritual exercise, an unbalanced spiritual version of starve/ binge bulimia? I think it would be if viewed in these spiritually bankrupt terms because, as such, it remains within the offending addictive cycle. But St. Ignatius Loyola had other ideas. In the *Spiritual Exercises* he slipped in a curious little page called the 'Rules with Regard to Eating'. It comes at the end of the Third Week of the Exercises, which begins with the Last Supper and ends with Christ's death and burial in the

tomb. The Rules are overlooked easily by retreatants exhausted by the Wagnerian magnitude of the drama they have been involved in and going full steam ahead towards the resurrection. They are also avoided by some directors, uncomfortable with the medieval feel of it all and the potentially scruple-inducing details about fasting. But Ignatius did nothing by chance, and this page lies at the heart both of the Exercises and of the Passion itself, because it is all about how we deal with a disordered appetite at source.

The purpose of this restraint of the appetite is twofold. It is to avoid excess, disorder and temptation, but also to provide an effective way of praying and living sacramentally, with the totality of ourselves, in an outward sign of the inward grace we are desiring, which is true freedom of heart. Ignatius was no stranger to fasting-induced illness and conceded later in life that this, too, is a form of compulsive disorder. Using the power of the imagination in a method familiar to today's diet hypnosis gurus, he emphasizes the harmony and order that come with making balance and restraint the stuff of our daily living. The whole page is an exercise in *agere contra*, Ignatius's idea that pulling gently in the opposite direction of an impulse run wild helps us to regain our balance. It connects with the very first paragraph of the Exercises, which talks of 'preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all disordered attachments' in order better to seek and find the will of God and with it the fullness of human flourishing.

And so we return to the notion of Lenten penance and its connection with the celebration of the Passion. Throughout the Exercises, as throughout the Gospel narratives, runs the thread of making choices. We see the choices we make, both great and small, in the light of the choices made by Jesus: on entering into our world and living as the Word made flesh, during the temptations in the desert, in proclaiming the Kingdom and modelling a particular type of messiahship, in the garden of Gethsemane, in the manner of his dying. They are all choices of a foolish God whose folly is wiser than our wisdom and who displays power through letting it go. Our world is in thrall at the systemic level to unsustainable consumption. For good or ill we are all enmeshed in the economic systems that both create and are the product of the consumer juggernaut. They thrive on drivenness: the drivenness of those whose daily grinding toil makes it possible

for the minority world to live beyond its need, and the drivenness of those who are straining to maintain an unsustainable lifestyle bloated by affluence.

The consumer culture and the driven lifestyles adopted by many as the price of living within it produce a whole array of addictive and compulsive habits. If these happen at the level of the body, so must our counter-cultural spiritual habits. Eating is hugely problematic for women dominated by the body image insisted upon by the fashion culture and, for both genders, food is often deeply embedded within routine compensation mechanisms. People often talk of their relationship with food in terms of addiction. Though not an addiction in the proper sense, we can have eating habits that are dominated by compulsion and feel out of control. Food has the added challenge of being the one thing on which we cannot go cold turkey. We have to eat to live, even if we struggle to know and control the difference between what is enough and what is more than enough, and fasting, in its proper spiritual context, is not an end in itself. As retreatants emerge into the focus on resurrection and the power of the Spirit in the Fourth Week of the Exercises and life beyond, the idea is to incarnate as fully as possible an experience of prayer that has stripped them of deeply embedded illusions and compulsions and liberated them towards being able to choose, on a daily basis, the end for which God created them. This finds expression in transformative discipleship in whatever way of life best presents itself. It has implications for how we live down to the smallest detail.

The Rules for Eating then are about both penance and temperance. Ignatius notes that the principal reason for doing penance is to make satisfaction for our sins, to overcome disordered appetites and to obtain some grace or gift earnestly desired. At the heart of penance lies a lucid knowledge of what drives our disordered lives. Such insight is a gift worth praying and fasting for. The dysfunctional appetite of many may not be for food but for power, money, status, image, success, addictive work patterns, fun, illusory needs in pursuit of illusory ambitions, all of which involve fleeing from the truth of ourselves. The compulsive compensation mechanisms that kill the pain of modern living may be television, sport, the internet, shopping, even the pursuit of the spiritual as if it were a lifestyle choice or accessory. We need to sit lightly to these as much as

to any other drive that has us in its grip. The crucifixion of Christ stripped his followers bare of many illusions and gave them an insight into the extent of their own poverty. Ignatius's Exercises put us in touch, at the level of feeling and imagination, but also at the level of our senses and our living flesh, with the dynamic of our own operative mechanisms. It is this truth that we try to get in touch with during Lent, with a view to seeing ourselves more clearly through the power of the risen Christ. The resurrection appearances are a further process in shedding illusions, even the most cherished illusion of how God characteristically operates. The disciples of Christ crucified and risen become able to see themselves and their place in the general order of creation with the eyes of the loving creator. It becomes possible to live in the dynamic of resurrection, learning to be led in willing poverty of spirit, against the grain of the drive to control, security and self-gratification. This becomes part of the liberation of the earth itself from its subjection to the futility of our unsustainable ambitions and consumer desires.

As the Church moves into the contemplation of the Passion in Holy Week, many of us may be coming towards the end of our Lenten fast for this year and gearing up for the celebrations of Easter, tasting and seeing that the Lord is good. But it is worth remembering Ignatius's comment when he heard his biographer, Gonçalves da Câmara talk admiringly about

someone as a man of great prayer. 'He is a man of much mortification', Ignatius corrected. It may be that it is the road of restraint rather than of excess that in fact leads to the palace of wisdom. For many the term 'self-denial' is problematic, because it sounds like a form of self-harm. In fact we are talking about the enrichment of self which comes when we are no longer at the mercy of our appetites. I am not denying myself when I resist my appetites; I am denying myself when I stuff my face or indulge any other compulsive appetite. Nietzsche thought of Christianity as self-denial, masochism and the sadism of enjoying watching people suffer. In those terms the ultimate sacrifice of Christ or the martyr and the small sacrifices of the penitent are seen as the inflicting of punishment. But Ignatius saw the re-ordering of the appetites as a route to self-knowledge and to liberation from compulsions. Like prayer, it deserves to be something that is woven into the fabric of our lives all the time rather than being dusted down once in a liturgical while. In that respect my philosopher friend turns out to have been right after all.

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