

Fr. Perozich comments —

You can teach an old dog new tricks. St. JH Newman turned on the light for me regarding the Lenten Fast. Why did I not learn these things in the seminary, yet rather have to wait until now to understand?

1. Keep my eyes on Jesus who is my power during this time to imitate His forty days and to receive the help of His grace for mortification.

2. Fast for love of Jesus. If I lose a few pounds, that is an extra.

3. Fasting will draw the devil to me; but Jesus is with me also.

4. Temptations will be stronger during this time.

5. **“it but increases the excitability and susceptibility of our hearts; in all cases it is therefore to be viewed, chiefly as an approach to God – an approach to the powers of heaven – yes, and to the powers of hell.” – Newman**

6. During fasting I can expect stronger temptations to pride, to vengeance, to greed, to envy, to sloth, to gluttony, to lust. Why would I subject myself to even stronger temptations when I already deal with these daily? For Jesus.

7. **“God’s children, in whom repentance is fruitful, and who, while they abase themselves are exalted, and at the very time that they are throwing themselves at the foot of the Cross, are still Christ’s soldiers, sword in hand, fighting a generous warfare, and knowing that they have that in them, and upon them, which devils tremble at, and flee. . . .” – Newman**

8. **“An Angel came to Daniel upon his fast; so too in our Lord’s instance, Angels came and ministered unto Him; and so we too may well believe, and take comfort in the thought, that even now, Angels are especially sent to those who thus seek God. . . .” – Newman**

9. **“Let us pray Him to make known to us His will, to teach us our faults, to take from us whatever may offend Him, and to lead us in the way everlasting.” – Newman**

10. **“with and in Him – learning of His Law with Moses, of His attributes with Elijah, of His counsels with Daniel -learning to repent, learning to confess and to amend – learning His love and His fear – unlearning ourselves, and growing up unto Him who is our Head” – Newman**

Unlearning Ourselves

St. John Henry Newman
Wednesday, February 22, 2023

The season of humiliation, which precedes Easter, lasts for forty days, in memory of our Lord's long fast in the wilderness. [And] we pray Him, who for our sakes fasted forty days and forty nights, to bless our abstinence to the good of our souls and bodies.

We fast by way of penitence, and in order to subdue the flesh. Our Savior had no need of fasting for either purpose. His fasting was unlike ours, as in its intensity, so in its object. And yet when we begin to fast, His pattern is set before us; and we continue the time of fasting till, in number of days, we have equaled His.

There is a reason for this; in truth, **we must do nothing except with Him in our eye. As He it is, through whom alone we have the power to do any good thing, so unless we do it for Him it is not good.** From Him our obedience comes, towards Him it must look. He says, "Without Me ye can do nothing." (Jn 15:5) No work is good without grace and without love. . .

Yes, even in our penitential exercises, when we could least have hoped to find a pattern in Him, Christ has gone before us to sanctify them to us. **He has blessed fasting as a means of grace**, in that He has fasted; and **fasting is only acceptable when it is done for His sake.** Penitence is mere formality, or mere remorse, unless done in love. . .

He went into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil, but before He was tempted He fasted. Nor, as is worth notice, was this a mere preparation for the conflict, but it was the cause of the conflict in good measure. Instead of its simply arming Him against temptation, it is plain, that in the first instance, **His retirement and abstinence exposed Him to it. Fasting was the primary occasion of it.** "When He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He was afterwards an hungered"; and then the tempter came, bidding Him turn the stones into bread. Satan made use of His fast against Himself.

And this is singularly the case with Christians now, who endeavor to imitate Him; and it is well they should know it, for else they will be discouraged when they practice abstinences. It is commonly said, that fasting is intended to make us better Christians, to sober us, and to bring us more entirely at Christ's feet in faith and humility. This is true, viewing

matters on the whole. On the whole, and at last, this effect will be produced, but it is not at all certain that it will follow at once.

On the contrary, **such mortifications have at the time very various effects on different persons, and are to be observed, not from their visible benefits, but from faith in the Word of God.** Some men, indeed, are subdued by fasting and brought at once nearer to God; but others find it, however slight, scarcely more than an occasion of temptation.

For instance, it is sometimes even made an objection to fasting, as if it were a reason for not practicing it, that it makes a man irritable and ill-tempered. I confess it often may do this. . . .It is undeniably a means of temptation, and I say so, lest persons should be surprised, and despond when they find it so. And the merciful Lord knows that so it is from experience; and that He has experienced and thus knows it, as Scripture records, is to us a thought full of comfort.

I do not mean to say, God forbid, that aught of sinful infirmity sullied His immaculate soul; but it is plain from the sacred history, that in His case, as in ours, **fasting opened the way to temptation.** And, perhaps, this is the truest view of such exercises, that in some wonderful unknown



way they open the next world for good and evil upon us, **and are an introduction to somewhat of an extraordinary conflict with the powers of evil.**

Stories are afloat (whether themselves true or not matters not, they show what the voice of mankind thinks *likely* to be true), of hermits in deserts being assaulted by Satan in strange ways, yet resisting the evil one, and chasing him away, after our Lord's pattern, and in His strength. . . . At least, I can conceive this – and so far persons are evidently brought into fellowship and conformity with Christ's temptation, who was tempted, yet without sin.

Let it not then distress Christians, even if they find themselves exposed to thoughts from which they turn with abhorrence and terror. Rather let such a trial bring before their thoughts, with something of vividness and distinctness, the condescension of the Son of God. For if it be a trial to us creatures and sinners to have thoughts alien from our hearts presented to us, what must have been the suffering to the Eternal Word, God of God, and Light of Light, Holy and True, to have been so subjected to Satan, that he could inflict every misery on Him short of sinning?

He was tempted in all points "like as we are, yet without sin." Surely here too, Christ's temptation speaks comfort and encouragement to us.

This then is, perhaps, a truer view of the consequences of fasting, than is commonly taken. Of course, it is always, under God's grace, a spiritual benefit to our hearts eventually, and improves them, through Him who worketh all in all; and it often is a sensible benefit to us at the time. Still it is often otherwise; often **it but increases the excitability and susceptibility of our hearts; in all cases it is therefore to be viewed, chiefly as an approach to God – an approach to the powers of heaven – yes, and to the powers of hell.**

And in this point of view there is something very awful in it. For what we know, **Christ's temptation is but the fulness of that which, in its degree, and according to our infirmities and corruptions, takes place in all His servants who seek Him.**

And if so, this surely was a strong reason for the Church's associating our season of humiliation with Christ's sojourn in the wilderness, that we might not be left to our own thoughts, and, as it were, "with the wild beasts," and thereupon despond when we afflict ourselves; but might feel that we are what we really are, not bondmen of Satan, and children of wrath, hopelessly groaning under our burden, confessing it, and crying out, "O wretched man!" but sinners indeed, and sinners afflicting themselves,

and doing penance for sin; **but withal God's children, in whom repentance is fruitful, and who, while they abase themselves are exalted, and at the very time that they are throwing themselves at the foot of the Cross, are still Christ's soldiers, sword in hand, fighting a generous warfare, and knowing that they have that in them, and upon them, which devils tremble at, and flee. . . .**

And since prayer is not only the weapon, ever necessary and sure, in our conflict with the powers of evil, but a deliverance from evil is ever implied as the object of prayer, **it follows that all texts whatever which speak of our addressing and prevailing on Almighty God, with prayer and fasting, do, in fact, declare this conflict and promise this victory over the evil one. . . .**

Let it be observed that. . . ***perseverance in prayer is especially recommended to us.*** And this is part of the lesson taught us by the long continuance of the Lent fast, that we are not to gain our wishes by one day set apart for humiliation, or by one prayer, however fervent, but by "continuing instant in prayer."

An Angel came to Daniel upon his fast; so too in our Lord's instance, Angels came and ministered unto Him; and so we too may well believe, and take comfort in the thought, that even now, **Angels are especially sent to those who thus seek God. . . .**

"He shall give His Angels charge over Thee, to keep Thee in all Thy ways," (Ps. 91:11) and the devil knows of this promise, for he used it in that very hour of temptation. He knows full well what our power is, and what is his own weakness. So we have nothing to fear while we remain within the shadow of the throne of the Almighty. . . .

Therefore let us be, my brethren, "not ignorant of their devices"; and as knowing them, let us watch, fast, and pray, let us keep close under the wings of the Almighty, that He may be our shield and buckler. **Let us pray Him to make known to us His will, to teach us our faults, to take from us whatever may offend Him, and to lead us in the way everlasting.** And during this sacred season, let us look upon ourselves as on the Mount with Him – within the veil – hid with Him – not out of Him, or apart from Him, in whose presence alone is life, but **with and in Him – learning of His Law with Moses, of His attributes with Elijah, of His counsels with Daniel -learning to repent, learning to confess and to amend – learning His love and His fear – unlearning ourselves, and growing up unto Him who is our Head.**

—from *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (1834–1843), Sermon 1. Fasting a Source of Trial

***Image:** *The Temptation of Christ* ^[1] by Juan de Flandes, c. 1500-1504 [National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC]

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Brad Miner's *Memento Mori* ^[3]

John Henry Newman (1801-1890) was made a cardinal by Leo XIII in 1879, beatified by Benedict XVI in 2010, and canonized by Pope Francis on October 13, 2019. He was among the most important Catholic writers of the last several centuries.

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