THOMAS AQUINAS AND
THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING
TO THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Stephen Loughlin

It is a fairly common observation that the importance of fasting is not well understood by most Christians. Its practices are well-known: fasting denotes an abstinence from food, specifically where the one who fasts limits oneself to one full meal and two collations each day; the collations together cannot exceed in quantity that of the allowed meal; specific foods (but not water) are prohibited, while others are encouraged. Its reasons, however, are less well understood and are usually reduced to two: personal preparation to celebrate a special liturgical event and a means to make atonement for one's sins. If one tries to explain that fasting plays a vital role in the acquisition and practice of the virtue of temperance, another set of misunderstandings arise with respect to this virtue. For many, temperance is conceived as that by which one brings moderation to eating, drinking, and the pleasures of the bed. It is a medicine, so to speak, to be taken when excesses in these areas erupt, or, at least, as a prophylactic against the development of a problem with respect to these pleasures. Temperance, then, is a bitter remedy, an austerity imposed upon oneself, depriving one of the common bodily pleasures, and is no more than a quantitative affair determined by the severity of the problem. It is little wonder, then, that many understand and even experience temperance so described as a misery with the far-off and often surreal promise of better, more sober days to come, particularly for those who, having wallowed in these pleasures for a time, have given them up, seeing that their indulgence would lead ultimately to their dissipation, but nonetheless still desire these things to which they have become habitually attached. At best, temperance, so described, is a frustration that one must bear, given the demands of one's life and the things that must be accomplished.

Prof. Stephen Loughlin, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy and Theology, DeSales University, 2755 Station Avenue, Center Valley, PA 18034. E-mail: stephen.loughlin@desales.edu
Josef Pieper has argued that these common misunderstandings concerning the virtue of temperance, and by extension its associated practices, are rooted in a reductionistic view of human nature and destiny and that the nature and importance of both temperance and its practices can only be revealed as temperance, and all that flows from it is embedded within a decent and well-articulated anthropology and metaphysics, much like that which Aquinas possesses.¹ In this paper, I would like to offer Aquinas's understanding of fasting as an effective corrective to the common characterizations of fasting and temperance just described. In the course of this exposition, it will be revealed that fasting is essential to the Christian life, that it is something that reminds Christians of their status in the order of creation, of the comportment that they should take before their Creator, of the joy and self-possession that are promised to the temperate, and of how distinct Christians are from the rest of the world insofar as fasting serves as a profound statement of their faith in, and hope and love of, God. It is only in this understanding that one finds an authentic justification for the measured denial of one's sustenance, the right desire to undertake this rigorous ascetical discipline in the first place, and the varied and rich fruit that flow from both.

ABSTINENCE AND FASTING

Aquinas's mature views on fasting are found within his treatise on temperance in the second part of the Summa Theologiae.² He considers fasting to be the first of what he calls the "subjective parts"³ of temperance, that is to say, those species of temperance that constitute the varying perfections that people exhibit when they enjoy and act from temperance itself.⁴ His discussion on fasting (de ieiunio—question 147) is introduced within the context of abstinence (de abstinentia—question 146). After having defined fasting as the primary act of abstinence, he then considers the deformity of this act in the vice of gluttony (de gula—question 148).

Aquinas understands abstinence as that virtue that governs one's enjoyment of the basic sensual pleasures, particularly those connected with the consumption of food. However, it would seem that the regulation of this consumption ought not to be a concern proper to the moral life, but rather

². Aquinas also treats of fasting in his Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard at IV, d. 15, q. 3. I have concentrated on the treatment found in his Summa Theologiae (hereafter abbreviated as ST) as a later work and one not written in light of the ordering principles of another.
³. For this terminology (as well as the "integral" and "potential" parts of the moral virtues), see Thomas's definitions at ST. II-II. 48. 1. c. (in relation to prudence), 128. 1. c. (fortitude), and especially 143. 1. c. (temperance).
⁴. The other subjective parts of temperance are sobriety (q. 149—he treats also of the vice opposed to it, namely drunkenness, at q. 150) and chastity (q. 151—he treats of virginity, chastity's perfection, at q. 152, and of chastity's opposed vice of lust at qq. 153-54).
to the medical or health sciences. Implicit in the very notion of regulation is that one seek the right quantity and quality of food (what we would call a healthy diet), which is best determined by the health sciences as they reflect upon the varied needs of the individual in question. This, on the face of it, seems to disqualify abstinence from being a virtue.\(^5\)

Aquinas agrees that it does belong to the medical arts to determine what constitutes a diet proper to the promotion and preservation of an individual's health, and, moreover, that a simple withdrawal or denial of food, which seems to be implicit in the practice of fasting, is incommensurate with such goals. Clearly, the abstinence with which Thomas is concerned in fasting is not some "micromanaging" of what is proper to the medical arts. Instead, this denial must have at its heart a moral component, something it achieves as the practice of abstinence is regulated for the sake of attaining some definite purpose over and above that which is proper to the medical sciences, but which practice, as Augustine states, cannot be so extreme as not to have "due regard for those among whom one lives, for one's own person, and for the requirements of health."\(^6\) In short, what is properly a medical concern becomes a moral one as the

---

\(^5\) See the initial objections to ST. 146. 1 and 2, and 147. 1. It is interesting to note how this kind of objection from the thirteenth century is easily recognized and understood today, that diet is not to be considered a moral matter but rather a medical one, even in those cases where one's diet is the direct cause of one's obesity and consequent poor health. These, they argue, are not caused entirely, or even importantly, by one's free choices, but rather by the underlying biology affecting either the assimilation of one's food or the decisions one makes concerning the quantity or quality of what one eats. The pervasiveness of this view is indicated by how unusual it is to hear one call another's diet evil in the full moral sense of the term.

\(^6\) ST. II-II. 146. 1. \textit{corpus} and ad. 2. Thomas not only has Augustine's views in mind at this point, but also those of St. Peter, when he encourages all Christians to "join... abstinence with knowledge" (2 Pet 1:5–6). Thomas elaborates upon this position in his commentary on the \textit{Sentences}. He states that there is a twofold necessity in the taking of food. The first is for the conservation of one's life. Fasting cannot licitly deny this to one, just as one cannot licitly commit suicide. However, he adds that "this necessity is exceedingly small. For nature is satisfied by a small [portion of food]." Second, food is necessary for the conservation of the body's condition. In this regard, there are two considerations. First, one must have a sufficiency of food so that one may discharge one's responsibilities to others; fasting cannot withdraw what is required for the fulfillment of these responsibilities since to do so would be to "steal" from others what is their due, and thus to act unjustly. Even in those cases where there is no duty that would be violated by fasting, but where it would, nonetheless, result in the nonperformance or hindrance of a greater work, such fasting, Thomas states, would be undistinguished. In this regard, he quotes St. Jerome: "A man of reason loses his dignity who prefers fasting to love, or a vigil to the integrity of his senses." The second way by which one addresses the conservation of the body's condition is that one must have a certain sufficiency for the optimum disposition of the body itself. He explains: "Since the flesh, abiding in its strength, is more difficult to subdue to the spirit, consequently that which is necessary for [the body's] condition so considered can be denied laudably, even if [that which is denied] can be taken licitly. This sort of denial does not hasten death [all that] much since the human body is found more frequently to incur mortal illness by reason of excess than from denial. Hence Galen also says that the whole of medicine is abstinence. For those who fast are found frequently to live longer." Nonetheless, the fasting undertaken by the Christian does not consist essentially in the preceding. Instead, these matters must be kept in mind in the determination of what is appropriate to the practices of fasting oriented toward the establishment, preservation, and promotion of temperance itself (\textit{IV Sent. d. 15, q. 3, a. 1, bra. 3}).
abstinence in question becomes a deliberate activity performed for the sake of something beyond the ends of the medical profession itself.

The first of these purposes is found in the regulation of the *interiores affectiones*, that is to say, the varied movements of the concupiscible aspect of our sensitive appetite, specifically our loves, desires, joys, hatreds, aversions, and sorrows, which together constitute the basic emotions of our humanity, as Aquinas describes them. Since the play of these emotions is not wholly autonomic in the human person (as it is for the other animals), but arises importantly as a result of the evaluations that we make concerning what is suitable or not to us personally speaking, it is not wholly the concern of the medical arts (except in those cases where the emotions, or the evaluations that cause them, derive primarily from our "humors," or, as we might say, from some physiological source, and where the cause is thus not importantly our rational and volitional activity). These concupiscible movements are best treated by the philosopher and the theologian whose care is directed to the determination of those things that directly bear upon the quality of the human person's emotions and the evaluations that give rise to them, namely an investigation and articulation of what is truly suitable to human beings, something discerned in light of our human nature and destiny.

---

7. Here, Aquinas has in mind the development, through temperance, of the concupiscible aspect of the sensitive appetite, and the bridling of the human person's disordered concupiscence that the Fall has effected. The first is a general psychological consideration of the natural play of the emotions that the human person experiences, while the second speaks more directly to the disordered proclivities of the person's desires so well discussed by St. Augustine in his writings. ST. I-II. 22–23 and 25 offer a description of the nature of sensitive appetite, of emotion (*passio*) itself, and its basic kinds, while 24 and especially 30 speak of the latter concern. It is to the human person's sensitive appetitive nature that the virtues of temperance and fortitude are directed, which in addition to justice and prudence constitute the ancient doctrine of the four cardinal virtues. These virtues, transformed in light of God's grace, seek not only the human person's reclamation but also his proper directedness to those things perfective of his nature, humanity, and his person as a child of God.

8. For a more extensive treatment of this point, particularly the physiological contributions to the human person's emotional life, please consider chapters 1, 2, and 4 of G. Simon Harak's *Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Character* (New York: Paulist, 1993), and S. Loughlin's "Tristitia et dolor: Does Aquinas Have a Robust Understanding of Depression?" *Nova et Venera* (English ed.) 3, no. 4 (2005): 761–84. Both of these works describe the emotional life of the human person as an embodied experience, one shared in common with the other animals. The emotional life extends to all aspects of one's being (specifically the physiological, psychological, and spiritual), with causal and effectual factors distributed throughout. Given the rational nature of the human person, as well as one's destiny and ultimate beatitude, the experience is indelibly marked and transformed, making it not only deeper and broader for humans, but more importantly, for our purposes, something malleable, specifically by way of the moral virtues, an aspect of the emotional life wholly missing to a nonrational, but sensitive, creature. Consider what Servais Pinckaers has to say along these lines in his essay "Reappropriating Aquinas's Account of the Passions," in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 273–87.

9. The whole of the *secunda pars* is importantly concerned both with the end or happiness of the human person and with the means whereby this might be attained. For an elaboration of this, see "Section II. Beatitude and Christian Anthropology," in Pinckaers, *The Pinckaers Reader*.
movements are informed by such matters, people will desire that which is seemingly suitable to them, specifically and most commonly food, drink, and sex, which presents a great problem insofar as these pleasures most strongly deflect many from the good that reason either can discern, or, having discerned, commands. Such pleasures stand, then, as powerful impediments to the human person’s moral life and personal happiness. Food is considered to be especially potent in that among all the sensitive pleasures, it speaks most strongly and directly to the human person’s desire for his bodily preservation and its promotion, as well as to the pleasures associated with the sense of touch (the genus of the sense of taste). Consequently, the improper use of food can become the most destructive force in the moral and spiritual life of the human person, even more destructive than sex and alcohol. To avoid this deflection from the authentic human good, the practice of abstinence must be taken up. Through its practice, the right addressing of the requirements of both one’s human nature and one’s destiny is assured.

The element essential to the Christian practice of abstinence, then, is moral. Refining the general moral purpose for which abstinence is undertaken, fasting is sought out to protect a person’s chastity, since excessive indulgence in the pleasures of the table can have the effect of turning the human person to desire strongly and inordinately the other pleasures of the flesh. We find here the view, especially prominent in Augustinian and Platonic thought, that when the definitive aspects of human nature,

10. The pleasures of the bed and those of drink, although intense, do not speak to the body’s preservation, and thus lack the urgency that is associated with the desire for food. He also argues (see below at n. 25) that although the pleasures of drink are immediate, they are nonetheless transitory, and thus have far less effect upon one’s person than those of food. For this reason, wine, taken in moderate amounts, is permissible during a fast, while meat is not. Wine’s effect upon one’s person quickly diminishes, while food’s strengthening of the body’s opposition to the spirit in its efforts to bring the body under the rule of right reason is something that does not fade as readily, food being the source of nourishment for one’s body and thus something vital to the preservation and promotion of one’s health. Consider how Augustine treats these issues at Confessions X. xxxi–xxxiv (43–53).

11. We do not often consider food in this fashion, seeing drink as that which most effectively destroys one’s person. While not denying the destructive force of excessive drink and inappropriate sexual relations upon one’s person (and those to whom one is bound by love and responsibility), it is clear that Thomas considers not just the detriments to one’s physical health, but, more to the point, the drastic effects that gluttony has upon the whole of one’s person, specifically as it affects one’s moral and spiritual life. This is specifically tied to the powerful and enduring effect that food has upon the strength of the body’s rebellion against the spirit’s right control of it, as already mentioned. All things considered, while a materialist view of human nature combined with a radical individualism might explain why some, who are gluttonous, feel at ease with their girth, intemperance, and its engendered or begotten (filiae) vices (see the discussion below concerning gluttony), such are revealed for what they are, once a properly robust psychology, morality, and metaphysic are in place. Without these, the practice of fasting retains only its natural, that is, medical, sense.
namely its reason and will, are turned away from the highest things with which they are properly concerned, and are centered upon those things that are commonly shared with the other life forms, the consequence is the corruption, abdication, and ultimately the submission of the higher's ruling capacity to that of the lower. In short, unless one loves, desires, and enjoys that which is highest, namely that which specifically and appropriately speaks to one's perfection as a human being, one will eventually be corrupted and enslaved by lesser goods and loves, in time becoming the very thing loved, molded to it in both thought and feeling.

Fasting is also sought out for its "cooling" or sobering effect[^12] upon one's person, something that makes one fit to contemplate these higher or heavenly things better, or, at the very least, to pursue one's intellectual studies more freely. In a word, fasting helps greatly to reduce, and possibly even eliminate, the perturbations that afflict one's person, thereby opening a space, so to speak, within one's *intention* wherein the higher functions of one's humanity can properly and fully operate with sharpness and precision, and thus allow one to comport oneself to those things that best address, promote, and preserve one's very humanity. Finally, apart from the control that it brings to one's appetitive nature, and the clarity it brings to one's reasoning, fasting benefits one's very person insofar as it is undertaken as an effective way of making reparation for one's sins. Clearly, then, fasting is not something prescribed by the physician who cares for the body. Instead, it is properly prescribed by the physicians of the soul, by those who are responsible directly for the spiritual care and perfection of one's person. And just as the doctor or the dietician sets down a strict regime to be followed so that one's health may be attained and preserved, so too do ecclesial authorities have the responsibility to make determinations concerning the character of this practice and to oblige Christians to take it up so that the very integrity of their person, their purity of sight, and the establishment of a right comportment with God may be attained and preserved.[^13]

[^12]: Presumably both physiologically (in relation to the humors) and rationally (in relation to a sound judgment of what is suitable and thus worthy of pursuit).

[^13]: ST. II-II. 147.1-3. At IV Sent. d. 15, q. 3, a. 1, the natural fast is considered to be part of the natural law, and, as such, is something in which one must engage to conserve the health of one's body. The ways by which this kind of fasting are realized is not set by the natural law, but must be determined by a positive law established, in this situation, by those within the medical arts who have the training appropriate to a prudent determination of what most appropriately conduces to the health of the body. For Aquinas, then, part of the Catholic Church's responsibility in commending a fast to her people demands that she have an eye to the requirements of the natural law and the expert advice provided by the medical arts in her determination of the specific times, seasons, types of food, and other such details of the fast that she institutes for the sake of her people's spiritual well-being.
The setting forth of what is appropriate in terms of the obligation to fast is complex. Besides having an eye to the body's needs, ecclesial authorities must also consider the following. First, there must be a recognition that although fasting has these purposes, nonetheless the determining of its time, place, and manner must be such that it not be penal in character, but rather be understood as something fitting and suitable. Thus, ecclesial authorities have the responsibility to educate their people as to the purposes and benefits of fasting, so that they may understand and thus be encouraged and strengthened in its practice. Second, although ecclesial authorities are responsible for determining the details of a fast, they must recognize that the precept to fast has the status of a general obligation, which is to say that given a reasonable excuse or set of circumstances, the Christian may be exempt from the keeping of the fast without incurring sin; again, the fast must not be onerous or penal, but rather commanded for the sake of the Christian's spiritual well-being and integrity. The precepts governing the practice of fasting must be fashioned, then, with wisdom and applied prudently, never insisting upon a simple one-to-one application of precept to individual. Common impedimenta must be discerned and considered in determining whether a particular person should be bound to the fast or not. These include the age of the participants (both the young and the aged are exempt, the former because of their developmental needs, which extend into their twenties, the latter for the maintenance of their health in their twilight years); the health of the individual (the sick are exempt, as are those who are under doctor's orders not to fast); one's profession (they are exempt who perform hard work, or work that must be done during the fast whose success would be impeded by the demands of fasting); those who find themselves on pilgrimage (they are exempt whose journey requires that it be done during the fast, or whose journey is so arduous that fasting would endanger its success). Economic conditions also exempt one from the fast, but only in those cases

14. Clearly, the penal is found in the practice of fasting insofar as it is reparative and restorative. This, however, cannot be the sole or primary focus either of the one who fasts, or of those who determine the particulars of the fast. Thus, Aquinas states that it is important for those in positions of responsibility within the Catholic Church to go beyond a mere statement of the particulars of a fast and seek to educate her people in the spirit of the fast. For it is only in light of the good that one gains and preserves by means of the instituted fast that one will be willing to give up lesser goods of a licit nature.

15. ST. II-II. 147. 3. Consider his parallel and more detailed discussion at IV Sent., d. 15, q. 3, a. 2.

16. Thomas offers a detailed description of the physiological reasons why children and the elderly are exempt from fasting at IV Sent., d. 15, q. 3, a. 2. The only exception to this rule is in times of great need or peril when all, even animals, are called to fast.

17. See IV Sent., d. 15, q. 3, a. 2 for these and other reasons.
where one does not know where and when one's next meal will come. Thus, beggars are exempt, but not the poor, that is, those who have a reasonable assurance of regular meals and a ready supply of food enough to preserve them in their existence, and who can thus profit from the practice of fasting.  

The times for fasting are set with an eye to those seasons within a church's liturgical year where its members are called to raise their sight to heavenly things and to seek forgiveness for their sins. Thus, before the celebration of major liturgical feasts, Christians are called to a devout preparation that importantly includes fasting; again, the mind is set most sharply to consider these most high things, the appetite is drawn away from other goods and set upon the highest good, and the comportment of the person before God is addressed properly through fasting. Thomas notes that the season of Lent is an especially important time to fast. He also includes fasting in the preparations one makes before receiving the sacraments, particularly baptism, the Eucharist, and ordination, where both the priest-to-be and the people whom he will serve are called to fast, so that they will be ready to receive and enjoy most fully and appropriately this great gift.

The severity of the fast is determined, once again, with an eye to both the spiritual and bodily good of the human person. Again, the ecclesial authorities urge their charges to seek control over their desires, to turn their eyes to God, and to seek forgiveness for their sins, but not at the expense of endangering their bodily nature. The balance is to give to nature what it requires and to withdraw from it what is enjoyed over and above this so that the fruits of the practice of fasting may be attained.

According to Thomas, this amounts to one meal in the day during a fast. However, Christians must not abstain from water during their fast, since it sustains life and is required for digestion and bodily refreshment.

18. ST. II-II. 147.4 and responses. With respect to the poor, children, and the elderly, there is also the issue that they are not able to take food sufficient for their health from the one meal that is allowed during the fast, another reason for an exemption from the fast (see IV Sent., d. 15, q. 3, a. 2 for this concern).

19. ST. II-II. 147.5-6.

20. The danger here is nicely stated by Gregory, whom Aquinas quotes at De Malo XIV. 1. sc: "The flesh, when restrained more than is right, is often weakened even for the performance of good deeds, so that while hastening to stifle the forces of sin within, it does not have enough strength to pray or preach. And so, while pursuing the enemy, we slay the citizen we love." Thomas Aquinas, On Evil, trans. Richard Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 408, quoting Gregory's Morals XXX, 18, n. 63 (PL 76:558C) as found in De Malo XIV. 1. ad 6.

21. Except before the reception of the Eucharist. Thomas also explains this in light of the notion of nutrition at IV Sent., d. 15, q. 3, a. 4, where he argues that since water (as well as a few other things taken during the fast) does not nourish one properly speaking, it can be taken during the time of fasting.
Medicines and digestives are allowed when ordered by a doctor. Care, however, must be taken in the consumption of these, for they might eat the allowed meal in an intemperate fashion, or take medicines and digestives fraudulently, that is, as if they were food. Such actions not only rob Christians of the benefits of the fast but lead them to sin anew, as these actions show contempt for the ecclesial authorities under whom they have placed themselves voluntarily and to whom they look for guidance and comfort in the spiritual life. Even the one meal allowed during the fast is put off from the time that they normally eat the main meal of the day. For the people of his time, this would have been around noon. Thomas suggests that three in the afternoon would be an appropriate time to eat during their fast. This delay helps to break Christians from their custom, to make their fast more prominent in their daily routine, and to keep in mind the reasons for the fast in the first place, as well as to dispose Christians to the fruits that derive from it. One does not harm one’s nature by this small delay, and there is also the benefit of eating at that time when Christ’s Passion had concluded, which also helps those fasting to link their own suffering to that endured by Christ. Again, only those capable of delaying their main meal are bound by the precept. As for the meal itself, the focus is upon those foods that will best serve their body but at the same time will allow them to benefit most fully from the fast. And so excessively tasty and luxurious foods are discouraged. Wine, fish, and vegetables are permitted, but meat is not. Eggs and cheese, being derived from animals whose meat is not permitted, are discouraged, particularly during the most important fasts. The principle guiding these choices is one based partly upon the medical knowledge of the day (certain foods encourage a predominance of certain humors, which incline the human person to actions and thoughts not in keeping with the purpose of the fast) and presumably on their own experiences (that certain foods require more of the body’s energy for their assimilation than others, that some foods more directly impede the success of the fast than others, with meat being that

22. ST. II-II. 147. 6.

23. Again, Thomas offers physiological explanations to support this position at IV Sent., d. 15, q. 3, a. 3. In addition to these, he describes the breaking of the fast at the ninth hour during Lent in a spiritual way: “We, in our fasting, are conformed to the new (man, i.e., Christ), who through His passion has recalled us from old times and shadows. Thus, we are first released from fasting at that time when Christ finished His passion, namely at the 9th hour. But before this restoration (of the human person’s proper dignity through Christ’s salvific act), the evening was an appropriate time to break the fast and take food, insofar as it signified that, through the food of the old man (i.e., Adam), they were cast down into the shadows of sin and death,” IV Sent., d. 15, q. 3, a. 3, c. 2.

24. ST. II-II. 147. 7.
which most strongly draws one's energies away from contemplation and centers it upon the pleasures of the flesh).  

---

**GLUTTONY**

If Christians fail to heed the directives established by their ecclesial community concerning fasting and go on to establish practices contrary to them, they begin to develop the vice of gluttony. This vice must first be distinguished from any physiological condition that leads to practices materially akin to gluttony. These are not intended by Thomas's discussion of gluttony. Gluttony is defined as an inordinate desire that one has developed by decidedly abandoning what reason and the medical arts determine to be a mean in consumption, and letting one's appetite run riot. In this situation, one's appetite rules insofar as one has allowed it to dictate this mean rather than have it determined by one's reason as the latter has been informed by the requirements both of one's bodily health and of the entirety of one's person. In neglecting that which is perfective of one's humanity, one allows one's appetite to become subject to whatever disordered or inappropriate love (and the desires that spring from such) that are at work within one's person, in this instance, to love food and its pleasures and to eat habitually to excess. The result is that one turns away from the higher goods of one's humanity, from contemplation, from sorrow for one's sins, and from the very control that needs to be exerted over the entirety of one's person if one is to seek effectively for one's happiness. In short, in the abdication of reason's right rule, one lives and

25. *ST. II-II. 147. 8. IV Sent., d. 15, q. 3, a. 4* addresses concerns about wine and legumes, namely that the first inflames concupiscence, while the second "makes one flatulent and thus excites one to inordinate bodily pleasure." He replies that although wine does inflame concupiscence, it does not do so to the same extent as does meat. Wine's effect is "short lived," and, more to the point, is required for proper digestion. As he states, a lack of wine "excessively weakens nature on account of hindering digestion." It should be noted that the quantities consumed were small, that is, in keeping with the needs of digestion, and, as was typical of his time, the alcohol content was lower than that to which we are accustomed today. Water was also typically added to wine at that time (a practice that still endures to this day in many Mediterranean countries—see parts I and II of Hugh Johnson, *Vintage: The Story of Wine* [Toronto: Simon and Schuster, 1989] for both these points). Meat, on the other hand, especially ministers to the strengthening of the body's opposition to the control the spirit tries to exert over one's concupiscence, as has been already discussed. As for the flatulent effect of legumes and the pleasure that derives from such, Thomas offers much the same answer as he did for wine: its effect is temporary and passes quickly.

26. Thomas's treatment of *gula* mirrors in form that which is found at *De Malo XIV*. The detail, however, presented by the latter treatment is far greater than the former.

27. This is especially clear in the replies to the varied objections found in article 1 of *De Malo XIV*. 
chooses as if one’s belly were one’s god. Such a person is ready to do whatever it takes to enjoy these pleasures, even despise God and disobey his commandments, specifically the third where the human person is directed to take his rest on the sabbath, that is, to rest in God for a time, and not in the things and pleasures of this world.  

Gluttony takes on many forms. Thomas, following St. Gregory’s discussion, reminds the reader that gluttony denotes a disordered desire for eating. This disorder must be seen with regard to the food that one eats, as well as to the eating of this food. With respect to the former, a person can manifest a disordered desire for food in three ways: first, by seeking costly or luxurious foods; second, by preparing foods with excessive effort; and third, by consuming food in excessive amounts. As for the eating itself, gluttony is manifested in two ways: in the mode of one’s eating (in eating too quickly, at the wrong times, and when one is not hungry; in being impatient to eat while awaiting its preparation) and in the manner of one’s eating (namely, without observing due propriety and restraint in one’s consumption).  

28. ST. II-II. 148. 1–2. In the parallel discussion at De Malo XIV, a. 1, the sin of gluttony, which consists in the inordinate desire for the pleasure of food, is not contrary to charity when one looks to the pleasure itself. But the desire itself for this pleasure can become disordered and thus contrary to charity in two ways. First, the desire can become disordered as it excludes one’s ordination to one’s ultimate end, as when a person begins to desire this pleasure as his ultimate end over and above God Himself. Thus his statement in his reply to the twelfth objection that “those who constitute their end in the pleasure of foods pertaining to the belly, which ought to be constituted in God alone, worship their belly as their god.” Second, the desire can become disordered as it regards only means but leaves one’s ordination to one’s ultimate end intact. Thus, one desires food inordinately but not to the point that one would want to transgress the divine precepts to obtain it. This constitutes a venial sin, while the first is mortal. Thus, according to the reply to objection 7, gluttony, as a mortal sin, binds the soul so that it is incapable of itself to return to the ordination of charity, while gluttony, as venial, binds differently, insofar as it prevents actual acts of virtue, and thus further growth in the virtuous life.  

29. It is interesting to note how foreign such notions are to many today who think little of seeking out and spending excessive amounts of money for the finest foods; who spend great time and money acquiring the techniques (through television cooking shows, books, lessons in school, etc.), the technology (the varied kitchen devices that litter today’s kitchens which, for the most part, were unknown to the average cook a scant seventy years ago), and the people or companies to prepare such fine foods; and finally who think little of consuming this food beyond what is reasonable, given the fact that it is so tasty, so well prepared, and so expensive. Aquinas would consider such practices gluttonous and thus a real danger to the Christian.  

30. ST. II-II. 148. 4. See also De Malo XIV. 3 for another treatment of Gregory’s definition of gluttony as a disorder in the pleasures of food manifesting itself in its five species, namely eating sumptuously, fastidiously, hastily, ravenously, and excessively. While the latter three disorders are still considered impolite today, our society rarely recognizes the importance of manners or propriety at the table as effective means whereby one regulates one’s desires while eating. Apart from this, the manners of the table lose their meaning and come to be seen as relics of a bygone age, as practices that were arbitrarily imposed, and thus as having no force or relevance for us today, except, perhaps, in business circles (courses teaching table etiquette are quite common on university campuses—“dining for success”—but such are undertaken not as a matter of justice, temperance, or decorum, but purely for their utilitarian benefits).
The particular dangers, as well as the details, of the practice of gluttony are indicated when one examines what Thomas calls the offspring (filiae) of gluttony, which are observed to follow commonly upon the vice itself. As one would expect, these offspring are quite serious to one’s person. First, there is in the glutton a dullness of sense surrounding the operations of the intelligence. For if the bodily aspects upon which one’s thinking relies are impaired by all that accompanies disordered consumption, one’s ability to think will be radically compromised (not to mention one’s capacity to contemplate the highest things necessary for one’s reclamation and happiness). Second, the glutton exhibits what Thomas calls an unseemly joy. In the impairment of the higher rational faculties, the sensitive appetites of the human person, all of which are directed to their consummation in either joy or sorrow, are allowed to indulge in either. He makes appeal to Aristotle who, as an example of this, states in his *Nichomachean Ethics* that excessive wine has the effect of making one confident and joyful without due cause. One could also make appeal to the latter books of Plato’s *Republic* wherein we see the decline of the human person’s character and morality in the person of the tyrant as he throws off the right ordering of his nature, allowing his appetites to exercise a rule that reason ought to exert. In any event, the principle noted previously is at work here, namely, that when the virtue of temperance is missing, people’s affective nature, no longer integrated into the whole of their humanity, begins to manifest itself in deformed ways. Third, the glutton displays a loquaciousness not befitting the temperate person. Again, with reason impaired by one’s gluttony, one risks losing whatever measure one had in one’s speech, erring often on the side of excess. Finally, there is scurrility, a lack of due measure in one’s actions. In speech, this scurrility becomes inappropriate joking. On the part of the body, Thomas notes that the glutton is characterized by a general uncleanness, which manifests itself in inordinate bodily secretions.31

**THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING TO THE CHRISTIAN LIFE**

The importance of fasting to the Christian life is suggested by a striking phrase that Thomas uses to describe fasting’s subjective effect upon the one who practices it, namely, that such a one exhibits a hilaritas mentis, a cheerfulness of heart and mind, something quite distinct from the oner-

31. ST. II-II. 148.6. Thomas is probably referring to the glutton’s lack of concern for his appearance and hygiene, or, more literally, to the fact that the glutton is more physiologically disposed to excessive sweating or unpleasant bodily odors because of his excessive weight and poor health. These five filiae are found in Gregory’s treatment already cited.
ous weight that many consider the practice of fasting to inflict, as was indicated at the start of this paper. This lightheartedness is not associated primarily with the health benefits that might be attained by a medical order to fast. Rather, it derives from the fact that fasting, as it is one of the subjective parts of temperance, is an important means whereby one’s unity, integrity, and peace are achieved and maintained, allowing for the other aspects of the Christian and moral life to be pursued with power and vigor; fasting radically and effectively centers one’s mind and desire in a way few other practices can. It is in light of this that ecclesial authorities have a responsibility to teach their people the nature and value of fasting so that they might help them to focus their minds effectively upon those things that are important to their humanity and happiness, to turn their entire being toward God, to consider how they stand with respect to their Creator, and to make recompense for their sins, but not to the point that they are made incapable of performing their work in the world or of fulfilling their social and familial duties.

These matters are made difficult by the fallen state of humanity, wherein Christians are disordered in their loves, suffer disharmony within themselves and with the rest of creation, and are inclined especially to the lower concupiscible goods. In addition to this, all people are creatures of habit, habituated to familiar ways of thinking, acting, and feeling that are often not in conformity with those things required for their perfection and happiness. The command of the ecclesial authorities, then, takes on added importance as it offers a powerful incentive to engage the will of their members to undertake a practice so contrary, in many ways, to both nature and habit. In this regard, one sees why Aquinas insists that the command be of the status of a general obligation, with an eye to prudent application, considering especially the needs of the body and the duties of life. Over and above this, however, there is the understanding on the part of an ecclesial community that the practice of fasting is to be commended as it offers Christians a unique opportunity to reflect upon things that they normally do not entertain without the discomfort and suffering that naturally accompany the voluntary withdrawal from food. To put this in different terms, just as an appropriate amount of fear has a clarifying effect upon both mind and will, but too much renders them ineffectual, so too do the sufferings and discomforts experienced in a reasonable practice of fasting have the effect of turning the believer’s mind and heart to what would not

32. See ST. II-II. 146.1. ad4 (noted by Pieper, Four Cardinal Virtues, 181).
normally be considered. In the suffering of fasting, then, one finds the opportunity to reflect upon one's life and to rectify one's mind and will so that one might comport oneself better before God and live the Christian life more fully. In this respect, fasting becomes the expression of a rational being's free and deliberate decision to place oneself in a situation wherein one might consider and embrace those things that are painful and difficult, but nonetheless vital to one's very health as a Christian.

The importance of this expression of one's humanity is found in the comparison of it with the lesser but very common experience of the emotions impelling us to great and important activity. In the experience of great pressure exerted by others or a particular situation, many find that they respond well, and in fact do their best work under such circumstances. The demands made upon them, the fear they experience, and other such things sharpen their minds, clarify what needs to be done, and order their actions so that they might accomplish the goal effectively. Sor­row, regret, and shame with respect to one's actions have a similar effect. While this is good, how much more fully does one act from one's humanity when one does not wait for life to impact upon one in these ways so that one might do one's best, but rather that one, through one's own rational deliberation and prayerful choice, brings these situations about so that one might humanly (rather than animally and reactively) behold what is hard to behold, embrace what is hard to embrace, and act accordingly? Fasting, then, becomes an opportunity to act in the fullness of one's humanity, bringing all that one is, consciously and deliberately, into the contemplation of and submission to the things of God.

Through the embracing of the suffering and discomfort of fasting, Christians are positioned, furthermore, to deepen their understanding of the nature of suffering itself. First, the pain of fasting reminds them of their nature and the choices that must be made if they are to come not only to the fullness of their nature, but to the happiness promised them by their Creator. Second, one's pain and suffering lose their seeming futility as they are united to the pain and suffering of Christ. For in fasting one is faced solidly with the frailty of human nature and is reminded of the need for one's redemption and of the suffering that was experienced by Christ for the sake of our redemption. In one's own small way, one contributes, in one's suffering, to the aid and redemption of others, in the same way that prayer, good works, and almsgiving contribute to the sanctification of the people of God. Last, in fasting, there is the opportunity to reflect

34. See ST. I-II. 37. 1, 39. 1, and S. Loughlin, "Tristitia et dolor."
35. This point is not particular to Aquinas, but can be found in the earliest practices of Christian fasting. See Rudolph Arbesmann, "Fasting and Prophecy in Pagan and Christian Antiquity," Traditio 7 (1949-1951): 1-72, and Herbert Musurillo, "The Problem of Ascetical Fasting in the Greek Patristic Writers," Traditio 14 (1956): 1-64.
upon the nature of suffering as it begins with, but ultimately exceeds, the experience of corporeal suffering. Here, Christians encounter an opportunity to consider not only the suffering specific to rational beings, as it encompasses the entirety of the being, both soul and body, but also how it is that God, although incorporeal and thus impassible, can himself be said to suffer.36

In light of what has been said, the practice of fasting undertaken apart from a moral or a spiritual context appears as little more than the voluntary imposition of pain and suffering (through the self-denial of the very sustenance required for one’s physical well-being) for the sake of one’s health (for example, to lose weight, to reduce one’s blood pressure or cholesterol, to relieve lower back pain, etc.), one’s appearance (to achieve a better self-image, being able to fit into a dress or a suit, etc.), or at most one’s mind, namely, that it be free for greater application to one’s studies (by reducing the body’s involvement in the processes of digestion so that one’s energies might partly or wholly be turned to contemplation). When viewed, however, within a Christian context, fasting becomes an implicit recognition, and a personal declaration to oneself and to the world, of the human person’s very nature as horizon, as a being that has a choice of comporting itself either to the world below or to the one above, of resting either in the pleasures of this world or in those found in God himself.37

The practices of fasting, then, become ultimately meaningful only as they are rooted in a Christian anthropology and metaphysic wherein there is a practical fleshing out of the human person’s very nature and destiny as


37. Torrell draws attention to Thomas’s description of this image at Summa Contra Gentiles 2.68. There, the human person is described as the “pivotal point between two worlds,” a being that “sums up in himself the totality of the universe.” Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., Saint Thomas Aquinas: Volume 2, Spiritual Master (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 253. He continues: “This opens up for us a marvelous perspective on the connection of things. For it is always the case that the lowest in a genus touches the highest in the immediately lower genus. Some of the rudimentary animals, for instance, barely surpass the life of plants; oysters, which are motionless, have only the sense of touch and are fixed to the earth like plants. That is why Blessed Dionysius can write that ‘divine wisdom unites the ends of higher things with the beginnings of the lower.’ Among the animal organisms there exists one, the human body, endowed with a perfectly balanced make-up, which is in contact with the lowest of the highest genus, namely, the human soul, which holds the lowest rank of intellectual substances, as can be seen from its mode of understanding; so that the intellectual soul may be seen as a kind of horizon and frontier (horizon et confinium) of things corporeal and incorporeal, in that it is an incorporeal substance and yet the form of a body” (253–54). See 254n2 of Torrell’s work for specific references to Aquinas’s texts wherein this image is used. Also consider G. Verbeke, “Man as ‘Frontier’ according to Aquinas,” in
articulated and understood within the Christian worldview. Fasting places one at the defining moment, so to speak, of the horizon that the human person is and demands that one choose which way to face, a decision exhibited to the whole world by this and all consequent acts.

Although this comportment, essential to the Christian understanding and practice of fasting, is effected importantly by the individual Christian acting within a faith community, it would be a serious error to think that this is sufficient to fasting’s description, practice, and realization. One must understand that the very root of the transformation that temperance and its associated practices undergo is found in the gift of God’s grace. In brief, Thomas maintains the basic teachings that Aristotle held concerning the nature and acquisition of virtue. However, these teachings are broadened by a further articulation of that in which human happiness consists, specifically in union with and enjoyment of God, and of the ways in which God aids the human person in attaining to this union and enjoyment. The former, effected through revelation and the virtue of faith, supplies the human person with a knowledge of that end to which one is naturally oriented and a love whereby one can bind oneself to God so revealed and accepted as one’s true end and beatitude. However, as Aquinas makes quite clear, where the disposition to an end exceeds the capacity of the nature of that to which that nature is so disposed, natural means are found to be insufficient to attaining and enjoying that end. What is required, then, for the human person to achieve this end are the “infused” virtues, both natural and supernatural, the former building upon and strengthening the cardinal and intellectual virtues, and the latter being pure gift of God of those virtues, namely faith, hope, and charity, that are properly proportioned to this end and thus allow the human person to be comportcd rightly to God in being, knowledge, desire, and activity. While these virtues are effected in the human person by God and not by one’s activities, they nonetheless require one’s consent for their reception and efficacy in one’s life. Thus, the Christian virtue of temperance and the practice of fasting ultimately take on their specific character.

Aquinas and the Problems of His Time (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 195–223; Torrell, “Saint Thomas et le Stoicisme,” Miscellanea Mediaevalia. Veröffentlichungen des Thomas-Instituts und der Universität Köln, I: Antike und Orient im Mittelalter (Berlin, 1962), 48–68; and Torrell and J. R. Moncho, eds., Némésius D’Émèse De natura hominis, traduction de Burgundio de Pise. Édition Critique (Leiden: Brill, 1975), specifically their interpretative essay entitled “L’anthropologe de Némésius,” ix–lxi, especially “II: L’âme,” xxxv–lxi, for further discussions of this image, especially in light of the Stoic sources upon which Aquinas is drawing. 38. This is made quite clear at ST. I-II. 63. 4. 39. See I-II. 51. 4, and I-II. 3–5. 40. To understand the causal conditions at work with respect to the human person’s role in the reception and enjoyment of the infused virtues, consider ST. I-II. 51. 4, 55. 4. corpus and ad6, 61. 5, and 63. For a more extensive treatment of infused virtue, consider q. 10 of Thomas’s Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus.
and meaning, and can be practiced as described in this paper, only in the knowledge, gifts, and virtues that God bestows on the human person and as one allows oneself to be formed by and cooperate with these very graces in the entirety of one's life. The Christian practice of fasting, then, is a witness to the grace and love of God that allows Christians to comport themselves to the source of their being and completion, a comportment that discloses a profound gratitude and appreciation on the part of the believer for God's many and great gifts, and that expresses one of the lengths to which believers will go to seek out the means whereby they might wholly be healed at the psychological, physiological, ethical, and metaphysical levels, as they flesh out their salvation in their present condition, hoping always for the joy and peace to come in the heavenly condition, which they anticipate by these and other practices in the here and now.

In the absence of fasting, Christians encourage, by their neglect, varied vices to take hold of their persons. Their intemperance dulls their heart and mind to the fullness of their reality and prevents the recognition of the graces that are offered continually to them. This robs them of the lightness of character that is theirs in faith, hope, and love ("my yoke is easy and my burden light") and inflicts unnecessary hardships upon those whose sight is riveted upon the changing realities of this world and thus are blinded to the nobility of their nature and the heights of their destiny. Through fasting, Christians steel their minds and hearts to what must be done, and declare in this very discipline a hope in that which lies beyond the everyday natural desires of this world. The danger, of course, in the Christian understanding of fasting is to lose sight of its purposes and the reasonableness attached to the details of its practice. In addition, then, to the guidance that Christians receive from both the medical and ecclesial communities, there are the teachings and the example offered by Christ during his earthly ministry. In teaching people how to pray, Christ notes the demeanor that they must take in order to fast well, and thus to avoid its hypocritical display, which empties it of all its value ("for they have already received their reward"). In losing sight of the purpose of fasting, one can easily fall prey to "self-admiration, vanity, self-importance, [and] impatient arrogance."\textsuperscript{41} From a wider perspective, Pieper has even linked intemperance to the varied mental illnesses that afflict the human person. He states:

almost all pathological obsessions, witnesses that they are to a disturbed inner order, belong to the sphere of temperantia: sexual aberrations as well as dipsomania, delusion of grandeur, pathological irascibility, and the passive

\textsuperscript{41. Pieper, Four Cardinal Virtues, 185.}
craving of the rootless for sensations. All these petrifactions of selfishness are accompanied by the despair of missing the goal striven for with such violent exertion of will—namely, the gratification of the self. In the nature of things, all selfish self-seeking is a desperate effort. For it is a natural, primal fact prior to all human decision, that man loves God more than himself, and consequently that he must of necessity miss his very goal—himself—by following the ungodly, the "anti-godly," path of selfishness.42

Christ calls all Christians to undertake the rigor of the fast, so that by it they might achieve and maintain the "selfless self-preservation" that is at the very heart of temperance. This, together with the advancement in the other subjective parts of temperance, is integral in becoming truly beautiful, where "the glow of the true and the good" shines forth from the well-ordered person that one becomes in temperance.43

Christ himself undertakes the fast, not as if he required it, but rather to provide a model for all Christians to imitate. The Gospels reveal that Christ's fasting was not all encompassing, but instead was something he took up for the sake of prayer, contemplation, and being rightly prepared to undertake the important duties of his life. And so, before he teaches, Christ retires to the desert where he fasts and prays. In this, he offers the way by which Christian teachers, for example, can best conform their

42. Pieper, Four Cardinal Virtues, 204. These few reflections by Pieper are not to be considered as an aside, but rather as a serious and profound statement concerning what, for the Christian, is the root of many of the common mental illnesses of our day, illnesses many, both Christian and non-Christian, consider to be manifestations not of a disordered moral and spiritual life, but rather of a defective physiology, and thus to be treated chemically. There is a growing body of literature linking growth in the virtues, specifically temperance, to a sound psyche, as well as to models of treating mental illness based specifically upon the ascetical practices of the Catholic and Orthodox churches for the elimination of the vice of intemperance and its many offspring. For a sample of this material, consider The Linacre Institute, After Asceticism: Sex, Prayer, and Deviant Priests (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2006); Robert C. Roberts and Mark R. Talbot, eds., Limning the Psyche: Explorations in Christian Psychology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); N. Hierotheos, Orthodox Psychotherapy, trans. Ester Williams (Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1994); N. Hierotheos, The Illness and Cure of the Soul in the Orthodox Tradition, trans. Effie Mavromichali (Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1993); and Thomas Verner Moore, Heroic Sanctity and Insanity: An Introduction to the Spiritual Life and Mental Hygiene (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1959).

43. Pieper, Four Cardinal Virtues, 203. The impact of these points, together with the works cited in the previous footnote, upon the whole of our understanding of mental illness and its treatment is clear, specifically as they require both a careful examination of the very metaphysic that underlies the practice of psychotherapy and psychiatry today, and a consequent evaluation of this in light of the Christian understanding of reality, the human person, and happiness. In short, any mode of treatment that privileges views concerning human nature and destiny antithetical to a Christian worldview, and in which those views are foundational to their modes of treatment, are to be considered as deleterious to the recovery and health of those so afflicted, and damaging to those doctrines characteristic of the Christian faith. Cf. Paul J. Griffiths, "Meta-physics and Personality Theory," in Roberts and Talbot, Limning the Psyche: Explorations in Christian Psychology, 41–57.
minds to the highest of things and effectively order their persons so that they might best serve their students. Again, before he takes up his public ministry, Christ fasts in the desert for forty days. This austerity, which does not go beyond what was exhibited by Moses and Elijah, serves to instruct all those who undertake any kind of ministry that they need to engage in great prayer and fasting in order to have their "house in order" so that they might speak rightly and effectively from the fullness of the truth. In bringing order to their person and a control over their concupiscence, such people are made strong so that when temptation does arise, they will be prepared to resist it and even expel it from their lives and the lives of others.44

The importance of fasting is thus clear not only for the right comportment and conduct of the Christian life in general, but also for those who hold positions of responsibility within ecclesial communities, which for Aquinas would importantly include the priests and religious of the Dominican order. In light of the preceding, one might say that a doctrine such as this reveals not only the beauty of fasting, but also the desire, if you will, of Thomas to instruct his fellow Dominicans fully in the ways by which they might best care for the flock entrusted to them, and, in light of the example and teachings of Christ, how they might best prepare themselves for this task. To consider fasting, and temperance in general, as denoting anything less than what has been described in the course of this paper effectively does a great disservice to God's manifold gifts, the human person's progress in the Christian life, the anticipation of the heavenly kingdom, and finally the very nature, dignity, and destiny of being human.45

---

44. For this material concerning Christ and fasting, see ST. III. 40. 2, and 41. 3. These points are argued effectively from a theological, philosophical, and psychological perspective in Linacre Institute, After Asceticism.

45. I would like to thank the participants at a conference in February 2005 at the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies for their contributions to an early version of this paper, as well as R. Hütter, L. Chapp, R. Howsare, and G. Kerr for their invaluable comments and assistance. The shortcomings of this article are attributable to me alone.