

# Introduction

What is so delicious as hurling a well-chosen epithet at the idiot who just backed into your petunias? What can equal three helpings of *marrons glacés*? Or another fistful of peanuts? Or fornication, especially if you feel it develops your personality?

The trouble with sin is it feels so good. It seems to fill a real need. If it didn't, who would bother with it? I've done a lot of thinking about sin here at the house, and I've decided to write this book about it. I expect a large reading public, because sin is one topic everybody knows something about first-hand. It's congenitally fascinating.

If you decide to read on, however, don't expect to find the seven deadly sources so familiar in song and story. You'll find eight, and even these won't be in the same sequence most of us are used to. This approach is newer than Vatican II, because it's so much older, if you know what I mean, very much older certainly than the old Baltimore Catechism.

As our Lord said, "Every scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like to a man that is a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure new things and old" (Matt. 13:52).

Well, here's what I found.

Thomistic theology, based on Aristotle, gave us an excellent objective view of sin, classified under seven tidy headings based on reason. Reason tells us all sin is a form of pride, so that's where the list begins, progressing logically into the familiar avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, before ultimately bogging down into sloth. This is eminently true and trustworthy, as the intellect sees sin, abstractly, and from a safe distance.

Please God I'll not fall into the sin of despising St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Gregory the Great or St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa, just to name a few doctors of the Church who used this classification with extraordinary results among all classes of

people! This view will always be valid for those who approach their problems intellectually. And who doesn't at one time or another?



But there are different ways of looking at the same truth. Instead of looking down on sin from above, we can view it more “existentially,” much as a housewife watches her good Sunday dinner become garbage as she scrapes the plates. Sin may be described, not as the intellect dissects it, but *as it happens* in any given individual.

There's nothing new to us about this humbler perspective. The Bible uses it almost exclusively. Our famous original sin in Eden, for instance, wasn't portrayed dispassionately as grand, primordial pride. It describes our first involvement with simple gluttony.

Of “the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of paradise,” God had said, “we should not eat, and that we should not touch it, lest perhaps we die” (Gen. 3:3). God didn't say why. We had to take His word for it.

And gullible Mother Eve preferred to believe the serpent, who then as always, said there's really no such thing as sin. She saw very well for herself that “the tree was good to eat and fair to the eyes, and delightful to behold; and she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat.”

And she gave her husband some.

Every infant begins the same way, through his stomach. And he does so as Adam did, through the agency of his “wife,” his human body. There need be no apology, therefore, for taking the biblical approach to sin, in accordance with the earliest tradition of the Church.

Long before St. Thomas and the scholastics, the ancient Church Fathers described sin in no other terms than those the Bible uses. This was especially true of those stalwart easterners we call the Desert Fathers, who grappled nakedly with sin in the inexorable solitudes of the Egyptian Thebaid in the third and fourth centuries. Theirs was no flight into Egypt in the wake of the “infant” Christ, but a calculated foray into an arena where

deadly combats between good and evil could take place at the most elemental level without mundane distractions. They were following, they tell us, the example of Christ grown to manhood, who was led by the Spirit for forty days into the desert to encounter the Enemy at close quarters.



The doughty “abbots” Serapion, Theodore, Cheremon, Joseph, Anthony, Paul, Isaac and their companions will be our guides in the pages that follow, God willing. They learned very much about sin in their solitary battles, and we would do well to listen to what they have to tell us about ourselves. They are quite in tune with the modern mind, for they are very much more “subjective” than St. Thomas or others nearer to us in time.

As a matter of fact, they were master psychologists in the true sense of the word, well aware of many principles which modern depth psychologists think they have discovered. Intensely practical, their interest in sin is anything but academic, recognizing it as a real and deadly disorder which must be cured at all costs.

They are concerned not so much with its “why” as its “how.” They do not progress logically, but psychologically over devastated human topography, following one sin as it develops into the next as it does in real life, and not as it is treated in later ascetical textbooks. No godless analyst ever probed more deeply or ruthlessly into the human soul. Anyone truly interested in breaking himself of sin with God’s help will find their pages fascinating. Others need not apply.

Every datum they left us bears the mark of bitter trial and error, but checked and counter-checked by the unfailing light of Holy Scripture given in answer to assiduous prayer. With this divine guidance they never fall into the lamentable aberrations which self-propelled secular psychology is so susceptible to .



Surprisingly enough, they don't begin their journey in Eden as we might expect. Their trek begins from Egypt, at a time when God's people have already long been held in the bondage of sin and slavery. They begin, in other words, with the real and existential situation of a sinner today, as he is found. They are not concerned with the—for us—purely academic falls of perfectly integrated individuals.

Egypt, they tell us, represents man's basic sin: *gluttony*. Until Egypt and its fleshpots are left behind, we can never hope to enter the Promised Land and take on the seven hostile Canaanite nations that lie in wait for us there. These seven represent the other capital sins, whose opposition is determined and deadly, who resist being dislodged and often rise again after defeat. These must eventually be entirely exterminated.

But "thou shalt not abhor the Egyptian, because thou wast a stranger in his land" (Deut. 23:7). Thus Scripture teaches that we can't hope to destroy gluttony entirely like the other seven, because food is necessary to us and our very gluttony has been a means of supporting our life, even as Egypt for generations supported the Israelites. We always take something of Egypt with us. The Abbot Serapion compares the Christian with the eagle, who though he customarily soars above the clouds, must descend to earth periodically to feed on carrion to fill his belly. The best we can do with gluttony is check its incentives and superfluous cravings by the power of the mind.

Gluttony springs entirely from within us, needing no outside help. The other seven sins, however, take their occasion from outside us and must be destroyed totally and replaced by their opposites, just as the Israelites conquered and displaced the seven nations of Canaan. Nor were these peoples displaced unjustly, because they were usurpers, sons of Ham, who had first dispossessed the chosen sons of Sem to whom the land originally belonged.

Here is typified very important doctrine, which must be grasped at the outset of any serious study of sin, namely that *vice is not natural to us*. If it seems so, this is only because fallen nature is the only kind of nature we have ever known. God himself had to become man to show us what true human nature is, arriving in our midst through an immaculately conceived

woman. Except for these two models, we have no firsthand data whatever on pure, integrated human nature.

Judging by fallen nature alone—as secular psychiatry must, for instance—we are bound to fall into disastrous miscalculations, both theological and practical. Ultimately we accept as “normal” whatever the majority of us happen to be doing at the moment, driving us headlong into immorality by majority vote, situation ethics and endless ramifications of perverted judgment.

There are no Calvinistic tendencies among the Desert Fathers. They are ruthless and realistic, but confirmed optimists when it comes to believing in man’s essential goodness. Like all great masters of the spiritual life, they envisioned its progress and difficulties entirely in terms of the gradual restoration of the divine image in which man was created and which is his by right.

Because virtue is natural to us, asceticism destroys only what is necessary in order to restore us to our original condition. As our Lord said, “From the beginning it was not so” (Matt. 19:8). Perfecting human nature doesn’t lie in adjusting to the Egyptian environment we were unfortunately born into. True human nature is the glorious Promised Land we hope to settle down in after all the interlopers are driven out.



Exposing to view the symbolism hidden in the Book of Joshua, the Fathers tell us that the seven nations Joshua fought successively in Canaan actually represent lust, avarice, anger, depression, boredom, vainglory and pride—in that order. We note with amazement that the envy and sloth we’re used to hearing about don’t figure in the list at all. That doesn’t mean they aren’t there, but in this “psychological” classification, we have to look for envy lurking in the territory between avarice and depression. Sloth belongs both to depression and boredom. We may not have looked at them this way before, but envy and sloth are really pretty much intellectual concepts, abstracted from what really goes on inside us.

Vainglory, on the other hand, is given an area all its own, whereas the scholastics preferred to regard it as simply a corollary of pride. And we note that the Fathers conclude their list with pride, where the scholastics begin. In practice, pride, the ultimate rejection of God in favor of self, is the final end of human sinfulness. Only a purely spiritual being like the devil can be capable of it straight off!

The sequence in which these sins occur tells even more about human frailty. Our initial gluttony is naturally followed by *lust* unless checked, for undue partaking of food normally leads to undue partaking of persons. After eating the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve realized immediately that they were naked. Lust in turn ushers in *avarice* or covetousness, for the shame it engenders impels us to hide behind extraneous possessions. We seek the covering of things, just as Adam and Eve sought loincloths and hid among the “trees of the garden” hoping to escape God’s eye.

Doesn’t everyday experience teach essentially the same thing, that we tend to rely on what we have to cover up what we are—or are not? Isn’t this the underlying rationale of status-seeking? It springs, it would seem, from lust (whether conscious or un-admitted makes little difference), nourished by an inferiority complex caused by nothing more complicated than true guilt.

*Anger* soon follows, next in order. Covetousness automatically generates it when we can’t have what we want. Modern psychology calls this “frustration” and thinks it has discovered something new when it postulates that it produces feelings of hostility. We’re also informed that anger produces depression. But here again the Fathers got there first. *Depression* is next on their list after anger, figuring as number five of the eight principal sins. Wonder of wonders, have we ever thought of this complaint as *sinful*?

That depression indulged in is sinful becomes evident when we learn that it brings forth the next capital sin, boredom. That boredom is sinful is an even greater surprise. Obviously we’ll have to overhaul our thinking drastically if we’re to recover the scriptural direction on sin. Not only does it bypass scholastic notions, but it runs counter to many unchallenged professional dogmas. Try telling this to an analyst!

It follows, of course, that to overcome any one sin radically, the preceding one must be tackled. It's rather fascinating, when you come to think about it. Controlling temper, for instance, by searching into the hidden roots of avarice could well lead into chartless psychic territory not explored for about a thousand years. There are roads, but they're not new, and sadly overgrown. Returning to origins can be very hard going, but it's indispensable for a fresh start in all the directions this subject can take us.

So far the sins mentioned are closely related, leading one into the other inexorably unless checked forcibly at some point. Also, they require the cooperation of the body. The last two, *vainglory* and *pride*, are in a class by themselves, because they can be entirely spiritual, and they rise all the stronger and more vigorous after the others are conquered, glorying in all one's past victories.

"When thy enemy shall fall, be not glad, and in his ruin let not thy heart rejoice, lest the Lord see, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him," warns Proverbs (24:17-18). Pride, alas, is the "sin of the perfect." It's the last to go.

After we leave the gluttony of Egypt, our enemies in the Promised Land are seven, but Scripture also calls them many, because each has its allies and satellites, its guerillas and undercover agents, its sympathizers and camp followers. We are troubled by them all, but each of us has a dominant opponent, more powerful against us than the rest, given our particular physiognomy and situation, demanding to be tackled first.

"Without me you can do nothing," God tells us (John 15:5). The Desert Fathers never tire of stressing this fact of life.

When the Lord thy God shall have brought thee into the land, which thou art going in to possess, and shall have destroyed many nations before thee, the Hethite, and the Gergezite, and the Amorrhite, and the Canaanite, and the Pherezite, and the Hevite, and the Jebusite, seven nations much more numerous than thou art, and stronger than thou:

And the Lord thy God shall have delivered them to thee, thou shalt utterly destroy them. Thou shalt make no league with them, nor show mercy to them: Neither shalt thou make marriages with them. Thou shalt not give thy daughter to his son, nor take his

daughter for thy son ... Because thou art a holy people to the Lord thy God ...

Thou shalt not fear them, because the Lord thy God is in the midst of thee, a God mighty and terrible: He will consume these nations in thy sight by little and little and by degrees. Thou wilt not be able to destroy them altogether: lest perhaps the beasts of the earth should increase upon thee. But the Lord thy God shall deliver them in thy sight: and shall slay them until they be utterly destroyed (Deut. 7:1-6; 21-23).

If God is for us, and we obey His commands, who can be against us?

All we have to do is fight. This book is a field manual. It doesn't pretend to explore the "mystery of iniquity" at its deepest roots. Man's heart, Scripture tells us, is unsearchable. God alone can probe it, the false claims of modern psychology notwithstanding.

All we need to know God has told us already: that our irrational and indefensible proneness to sin lies in a *failure of faith*, just as Mother Eve's did.

At the suggestion of the serpent, she permitted herself to doubt God's word. Did He *really* mean exactly what He said about not eating the fruit? Wasn't there, after all, a more *adult* approach to the problem? Is there actually such a thing as sin? Isn't it, after all, more like a momentary snag in our inevitable evolution towards our omega point? Doesn't our liberation from Egypt set us free from old Judaic taboos?

There is no adult approach to sin. We proclaim our puling immaturity every time we fall into it. This book, please God, will not be such an approach. It's for infants in the spiritual life, but believing infants who take God at His word. He alone can save us from our sins, let alone forgive them; but as St. Augustine said, although He created you without your cooperation, He won't save you without it.

So here is some of Mother Church's most venerable advice on how to go about cooperating, pulled out of her vast storeroom. Here is what we must do with God's help in our frantic forays into Canaan. It's not spectacular work, but like any common foot-soldier's, it's essential if you want to win, or just stay alive.



Now, before preparing to leave Egypt, shall we take a last dispassionate look at what we're leaving behind?

Let's evaluate ...

## Gluttony

What, exactly, makes it so finger-lickin' good? God knows. He made us for eating, and to make sure we wouldn't forget and starve to death, He attached considerable pleasure to it. For us, to be is to eat.

I eat, therefore I am.

Eating is part of creaturehood. Not self-sufficient, we can't exist at all without constantly partaking of something outside ourselves, even if it's only air. Our dependence on our Creator is total and eternal.

Everything God provides for us is "food" in the large sense. As our Lord told the devil, "Not in bread alone does man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). To His disciples He says, "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, that I may perfect his work" (John 4:34).

Assimilating anything without reference to the divine will, just because we want to, is, strictly speaking, *gluttony*.

That the fall of mankind was strictly from hunger is historical fact. Mother Eve was the first woman who couldn't stick to a prescribed diet, because she was the first woman. Gluttony is a life-long threat with us because we have to eat, and we have all inherited her basic weakness.

There's a hunger for everything. Eve was made to love good things, and she saw very well that the forbidden fruit was not only "good to eat" and sensually gratifying, but also "fair to the eyes," and "delightful to behold," for the knowledge it could give. Some people would rather gorge their eyes than their stomachs. Often they do both. (There is, after all, a theological reason for eating popcorn at movies or eating dinner in front of television.) Others avidly pursue knowledge, voraciously devouring books or graduate courses, or maybe battenning on "dialogue." Still others hunger for praise or "beautiful experiences." Among the more spiritual, there's even a hunger for the yummy consolations to be found in prayer.

From the perspective of Eden, all sin can be seen as a crescendo of “gluttonies.” It wasn’t Sigmund Freud who discovered the pleasure principle as a motive for human behavior!

The elaborate Mosaic dietary laws, which we judge so arbitrary and materialistic today, were in fact designed to portray sin precisely in this way. When God forbade his chosen people to eat swine’s flesh or geckos, He was teaching them they must not absorb into themselves just anything they pleased.

Obviously the sin didn’t lie in succulent pork chops or noisy little reptiles; it lay in “eating” the evils these represent, and which God forbids. It lay in disobedience. In their true sense, the old Mosaic laws are as binding upon us as they ever were. As our Lord promised, not one jot or tittle of their content will be done away with, but only perfected and revealed in their true spiritual meaning.

The control of gluttony is therefore the key to the whole spiritual life. Popular modern psychology sees clearly enough that:

Feeding is, unquestionably, the prime feature of daily life from the very first day of existence ... A baby is quite a tyrant; almost from the time of birth he learns that his mouth is a prime weapon in commanding the world as he knows it. Because howling and crying bring him prompt gratification of his drives and desires, he has a sound reason for holding the oral cavity in high esteem. Such a baby, if all his whims are satisfied by an overanxious mother, goes on in life, continuing to pamper his mouth, eating well, depending on oral satisfaction to allay frustration. He may turn up in later life as the glib talker, the high-pressure salesman, teacher, actor or executive, etc. (James A. Brussel, M.D., *The Layman’s Guide To Psychiatry*).

The same baby, psychiatry also tells us, soon finds he can also use his mouth to *bite*, not just his food, but others, as soon as he gets teeth. (The shortcut from gluttony to murder can be taken before we ever leave our cribs.)

Scripture told us all this long ago. To the Desert Fathers it was as plain as day that because we come into the world as nursing infants with an insatiable desire to absorb good things, the end of hunger for us can be nothing less than God. Because

nothing else can really satisfy us completely, gluttony consists precisely in trying to find full satisfaction elsewhere. This is what makes it so dangerous. It can throw us off course radically, as it did Adam and Eve, right there in the beginning. Our whole life can degenerate into little more than a series of bites and chews.

The believer who at mealtime asks God to “Bless us and these Thy gifts,” is not only taking cognizance of all the good things God has provided for us, and which He means for us to enjoy; but more important, he is asking God’s help in assimilating them rightly, “blessing” those at table as well as the food. He is furthermore pronouncing a mild exorcism against the malefices of the Enemy, who can sometimes effect possession of his victim by ingestion.

Mealtime is a solemn occasion, properly accompanied by prayer, for God chose to become Food for us, even in this life. After the Last Supper, the most insignificant morsel should be recognized not only as a manifestation of everything God gives, but as a symbol and pledge of eternal life, of God himself.

It was for this that we were given stomachs, both carnal and spiritual, and not for the incidental pleasures of the palate. As never before it behoves us not to be gluttons. St. John of the Cross, mystical Doctor of the Church, warns that we risk falling into this deadly vice even as regards the Eucharist, “being more eager to eat than to eat cleanly and perfectly.”



Preparation for the Eucharist, as the Church has always taught, should begin where life begins, at the natural and physical level. The Fathers laughed at beginners who set themselves to controlling their thoughts without first acquiring some control of their stomachs, hoping to tangle with powerful Canaanites before they had even eluded the pursuing Egyptians. “It is impossible,” reports John Cassian, “for a full belly to make trial of the combat of the inner man: nor is he worthy to be tried in harder battles who can be overcome in a slight skirmish!”

The Fathers discerned three forms of gluttony:

1. The first one consists in eating whenever we please. This might mean often or seldom, ahead of time or later, never or simply constantly nibbling between meals. Habitually indulged in, this form of gluttony quite predictably disposes its victim to restlessness and dissatisfaction with His state in life. It feeds instability.

2. The second form is being choosy about what we eat. In the world this might win us an international reputation as a gourmet, or simply as a weight-watcher, depending on whether our eye is on the menu or the calories, in other words, whether we are motivated by sensuality or vanity. There is no more refined form of gluttony than dieting from motives of pride. The dazzling authority on haute cuisine could fall into this category, but so might also the dear little old lady who insists on turning the host's kitchen upside down looking for a piece of dry toast, or the health fanatic who will consume only roots, berries and spring water. It's hardly surprising that this particular type of gluttony especially breeds covetousness, because its victims are orientated always to looking for something they haven't got at the moment. It's directly opposed to the perfect abnegation of Christ, who told His disciples to "Eat such things as are set before you" (Luke 10:9).

3. The third type of gluttony is usually the one we think of as gluttony proper: eating as much as we want. Its victims are more likely to be fat, I suppose, and therefore more in evidence. Because there's a limit to what the stomach will hold, the Fathers tell us this one by a kind of inner necessity leads most directly into lust and sexual impurity, the next capital vice after gluttony. They were fond of quoting the prophet Ezechiel, who revealed that Sodom fell into the unbridled license with which her name became synonymous as a result of "fullness of bread and abundance" (16:49). No one with eyes could fail to see the relation between the glutting affluence of modern society and the so-called sexual revolution .



Carnal gluttony could hardly be called deadly in itself except that it unlocks the door, as we have seen, to all the other sins of

which we are capable. No vice so lays bare, right at the dinner table where all can see it, the proud independence of the human will, its resistance to order and restraint, its slavery to sensuality. How many parents now deploring the licentiousness of their children never thought to stifle it at its source by the simple expedient of teaching them to eat only what is set before them at proper times!

By subjecting the spirit to the mindless whims of the body, gluttony literally reverses the order of creation in the same way that Adam did when he “listened to his wife.” Its effects reach far beyond obesity, alcoholism or stomach troubles, for “not only is drunkenness with wine wont to intoxicate the mind, but excess of all kinds of food makes it weak and uncertain, and robs it of all its power of pure and clear contemplation.” It stops spiritual progress dead.

Unchecked, it eventually ushers in apostasy, say the Fathers. We see around us today those heretics and apostates whom St. Jude twice characterized as men “walking after their own lusts.” He too cited Sodom and Gomorrah, for disordered appetites inevitably end by craving intellectual falsehood for their “itching ears” in the same way their stomachs were allowed to crave the “strange flesh” fancied in Sodom. Gluttons for punishment? St. Paul calls them “the enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction; whose God is their belly; and whose glory is in their shame; who mind earthly things” (Phil. 3:18-19) .



What to do?

Although their advice applies to everyone, the Fathers never deal in vague generalities. They are very explicit about how to deal with gluttony. In accordance with the three forms of the vice, they lay down three appropriate rules to follow:

1. Eat only at designated times.
2. Eat what is set before you.
3. Always leave the table with room for more.

We must, in other words, maintain order, plainness and sparseness in eating. (Foods requiring long and careful preparation come in for a special anathema. Sorry, gourmets.)

Even so, mastering these principles isn't quite enough. Because our nature is disordered at the very root of being, *we must fast*. Because we sin with both body and soul, both must suffer and make reparation. As St. Paul put it, "I chastise my body and bring it under subjection, lest perhaps after preaching to others I myself should be rejected" (1 Cor. 9:27).

We can never feel safe when it comes to gluttony, no matter how far we have advanced spiritually. We are always like the Israelites in the desert, secretly longing for the delicious onions and stews left behind us in Egypt. We're only too ready to return to the secure slavery of a welfare state rather than to learn free dependence on the delicate manna God provides for us.

We have our Lord's word for it that fasting, furthermore, when joined with prayer, is the ultimate weapon against the devil. The first official act of His public ministry, we might say, was the example of prayer and fasting He gave us during His forty days in the desert, by which He outmaneuvered the Enemy. As we know, it was because of their deficiency in fasting and prayer that later His disciples found themselves unable to cast out the dumb spirit from the epileptic boy whose father had come to them for help.

Asked why His followers didn't fast like St. John the Baptist's, He answered in effect, "Don't worry, they will!" He only advised that it be kept secret, so as not to feed vanity and self-righteousness.



But what about my *health*?

It's funny, but the Desert Fathers never mention it. Personally, I like St. Teresa's advice on the subject: Forget it. As if the proverbial longevity in the more austere contemplative communities hadn't already proved the point, now even modern science tells us that reduction in food intake actually delays the aging process.

Saints generally have concluded that health is either suffered or enjoyed, depending on God's will in particular cases. It's not their problem at all, but His. Whoever can't leave such worries

behind is far from leaving all things for Christ, who positively forbade us to worry about food at all.

This doesn't mean that the Fathers were ignorant about particular foods and their effects. In fact, they probably knew very much more about them than we do. They counsel, for instance, to stay away from those which kindle lust. Unfortunately they neglect to tell us which these are, no doubt assuming that anybody knows these basics. Alas, how could they foresee how much our civilization would have forgotten once it discovered—and over-ate—on science!

They lay down no more definite rules for fasting than our Lord did, because none can be universally applied. Dealing as it does with material bodies, differences in age, sex and physical constitution must always be taken into account. Hard fasting for one individual could be feasting for another. In our own day Mother Church leaves this delicate question very much to each one's conscience, although she never ceases to recommend abstinence from food as a basic means of maintaining spiritual balance and sharpening inner vision.

The Lenten liturgy implores “that our fasting may have a salutary effect, so that the mortification inflicted upon our body may benefit our souls” (*Collect*, Sat. after Second Sun.); and “that thy faithful who to mortify the flesh abstain from food, may likewise refrain from sin by the practice of justice.” (*Collect*, Mon. after Second Sun.)

The end of fasting, after all, isn't gnawing hunger pangs, or even a beautiful figure, but joy and purity of heart. Without religious motivation, fasting soon degenerates into mere dieting or a display of ascetic prowess with purely natural rewards. Keeping the proper spiritual ends in view, too severe fasting can never be recommended (barring some special inspiration from God). In practice it drives us screaming and complaining back to Egypt for many unnecessary relaxations, and keeps us bouncing from feast to famine by turns. It's much more effective, and much harder, to practice dogged moderation in our fasts.

Also, because our Lord approved of His followers not fasting “as long as the bridegroom is with them” (Matt. 9:15), the Fathers tell us not to scruple about breaking voluntary fasts on social occasions. At such times, they maintain, Christ is present in the person of our guest and “mourning” is out of

place. Not that social life can ever be used as an excuse for laxity. John Cassian, visiting in the desert of Skete, tells this story of himself:

When one of the elders was pressing me to eat a little more as I was taking refreshment, and I said that I could not, he replied, "I have already laid my table six times for different brethren who had arrived, and pressing each of them, I partook of food with him and am still hungry, and do you, who now partake of refreshment for the first time, say that you cannot eat any more?"



Even at best, however, bodily fasting will avail us little if it's not accompanied by rigorous spiritual fasting, and in this regard we can be as ruthless as we please. Didn't our Lord tell us plainly that it isn't what goes into a man that defiles him, but what comes out of him? "For from the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies" (Matt. 15:19).

Hear those super-psychologists the Desert Fathers on "soul-food":

And let us not believe that external fast from visible food alone can possibly be sufficient for perfection of heart and body unless with it there has also been united a fast of the soul. For the soul has its foods which are harmful ... Slander is its food, and indeed one that is very dear to it. A burst of anger also is its food, even if it be a very slight one; yet supplying it with miserable food for an hour, and destroying it as well with its deadly savor. Envy is a food of the mind, corrupting it with its poisonous juices and never ceasing to make it wretched and miserable at the prosperity and success of another.

Vainglory is its food, which gratifies it with a delicious meal for a time; but afterwards strips it clear and bare of all virtue ... All lust and shifty wanderings of heart are a sort of food for the soul, nourishing it on harmful meats, but leaving it afterwards without share of the heavenly bread and of really solid food. If then with all the powers we have, we abstain from these in a most holy fast, our observance of the bodily fast will be both useful and profitable. For



labor of the flesh, when joined with contrition of the spirit, will produce a sacrifice which is most acceptable to God.



So much for fasting, necessary and efficacious. There is nevertheless, the Fathers say, only one real remedy for gluttony: *Anchoring the mind in the contemplation of divine things.*

This is simply a fancy way of saying that we must gradually learn to feed on God, beginning now in time the “eating” to which we are destined in the Beatific Vision. If even physical love-making or a passion for work or study can leave us no time to eat when we are in its throes, think what an awakened appetite for God and the things of God could do!

Where our hunger for God is concerned, no measures need be taken to check unruly appetite. We were made for Him. As St. Bernard put it, the measure of loving God is to love Him without measure. In Him all gluttonies are swallowed up and all desires satisfied.

“O taste and see that the Lord is sweet!” (Ps. 33:9).

“I am the living bread which came down out of heaven. If any man eat of this bread he shall live forever” (John 6:51-52).



Fortifying ourselves with this thought as we tighten our belts on the march from Egypt, perhaps we might do well to do a little reconnoitering and get an idea of what lies in wait for us once we get into Canaan. After their first glimpse, Moses’ scouts returned petrified with fear. Ahead of them, they reported, lies a land “which devoureth its inhabitants: the people, which we beheld, are of a tall stature. There we saw certain monsters of the sons of Enac, of the giant kind: in comparison of whom, we seemed like locusts!” (Num. 13:33-34).

At this the vast majority of the Israelites were for leaving well enough alone and returning to Egypt as quickly as possible. (Reasonable people always find sanctity unreasonable.) Only Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua found the courage to stand

their ground, insisting that the Promised Land was well worth the effort.

“If the Lord be favorable, he will bring us into it, and give us a land flowing with milk and honey.” As for its present inhabitants, “We are able to eat them up as bread!” cried Joshua and Caleb. “All aid is gone from them: the Lord is with us” (Num. 14:8-9).

The “locusts” weren’t so sure. Eventually only God’s flaming anger drove them forward into open provocation of such powerful opponents. The first one to be dealt with was the Hethite who held Jericho. He was a tall monster indeed, commonly called ...

## Lust

Nothing becomes a necessity so quickly as luxury. And we needn’t be surprised that *luxuria* is in fact the classical word for lust. Of all the usurpers in the Promised Land there’s no bigger bully, no greater phony. This ubiquitous Hethite finds friends and flunkies everywhere, establishing himself in every corner of the country.

Contributing nothing to the economy, he has nevertheless persuaded almost everybody that his services are indispensable and must be subsidized. His partisans are so emotionally involved with him they find it impossible even to speak of him objectively, and unfortunately only his partisans seem to be able to command a hearing. He has been there a long time. The reprobate Esau “offended the mind” of his parents by marrying two of his daughters, and generations later King Solomon followed suit.

Hopelessly taken in by his most blatant impostures, modern psychology is of little or no help to the Israelite fresh from Egypt when it comes to dealing with lust. For all practical purposes, lust and sex are identical in the modern mind, which seems to have lost all ability to discern what is part of the human condition and what is in fact entrenched vice, first established in the deformations of original sin and the laxities of youth.

The commonest and most deep-seated aberrations are considered normal because they are common and deep-seated.