Worcester F 80 Distinctiones

4 Abstinence (*Abstinencia*)

Abstinence is the most powerful remedy against gluttony. The sign of this is that the saliva[[1]](#endnote-1) of a fasting man is poison to a serpent. Even the serpent himself is renewed through abstinence, according to the philosophers Aristotle[[2]](#endnote-2) and Avicenna.[[3]](#endnote-3) Just as it is treated in the gloss[[4]](#endnote-4) on Matt. 10[16]: “Be wise as serpents,” etc.

¶ For while a serpent senses itself weighed down by a sickness or old age, it abstains for many days so that its skin becomes loosened from the flesh. After having tasted a certain bitter herb, it vomits all the things customarily harmful to it. After this it bathes itself in water to moisten the skin, then going to a cleft of a rock it puts off its skin, and finally exposing itself to the sun it recuperates the skin and then it sees more clearly, it crawls more vigorously, it eats more avidly than before. If therefore nature teaches the serpent to renew and to improve its state, much more a rational creature ought to renew himself against gluttony.

¶ And this by four spiritual degrees as well as bodily as is evident concerning the snake. The first of these is the subtraction of food through the detestation of sin. Second, therefore is the vomiting of the harmful mixture through confession of the mouth. Third is to leave off the old habit by custom of desertion. Fourth is turning to the sun of justice with a firm purpose of heart.

¶ Again abstaining is from three things: from the superfluity of food, from the society of evil men, and from the filth of sins. Concerning the first, Eccli. [3:32]: “A wise heart will abstain from sins.” Concerning the second, Psal. [17:26]: “With the holy, you will be holy.” And Eccli. [13:1]: “He that touches pitch, shall be defiled with it.” Concerning the third, Eccli. 3[:32]: “A wise heart, and which has understanding, will abstain from sins.” Where the *Gloss* upon that of [1] Tim. 5[:22]: “Keep yourself chaste,” God wants himself to be served prudently, lest we be made weak by too much abstinence, and then require the assistance of the medics.[[5]](#endnote-5) Wherefore Bernard, he makes a burnt offering of pillaged goods, who afflicts his body immoderately, either by lack of necessary nourishment or sleeping too little.[[6]](#endnote-6) And Seneca,[[7]](#endnote-7) “Observe this rule for a healthy life: that you grant your body as much as it needs for its well-being.” For as Gregory says, “When our flesh is held in too strict bonds, it grows too weak to conduct its good work.”[[8]](#endnote-8) This rule is prefigured by what is said in Num. 30[:14]: “If a woman afflicts herself or her soul in fasting or by another means, it shall depend on the will of her husband.” Similarly, a penitent must subject himself to the judgment of a discriminating priest, so that he may not be burdened too much in abstaining.[[9]](#endnote-9) It is even from every sin in general and this is because [sins] separate us from God, Tobias 1[:3-5] taught his fellows to fear God and abstain from every sin.

¶ Second, because sin is harmful, just as delicacies are hurtful to the poor and the weak, Eccli. 3[:32]: “A wise heart, and which has understanding,” etc.

Third because

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they stain, [1] Thess. 4[:3]: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that you should abstain,” etc.

Fourth, because sins besiege the good of the soul, thus fighters abstain from contrary matters, 1 Pet. 4[:11]: “I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, to refrain yourselves,” etc.

Fifth, because they disgrace us, thus elders abstain from penitential clothing, [1] Thess. 5[:7]: “From all appearance of evil refrain yourselves.”

Sixth, because they cause death, thus one perceiving the net abstains from food, Eccli. 37[:34]: “He that is temperate, shall prolong life.”

¶ And note that three states are accustomed to being recused from abstinence: the penalty of the suffering, the age of infancy, and the detectability of the food.

1. Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus* 5.2.5 ed. Herman Stadler (Munich: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1916), (1:552): Adhuc morsus serpentum magnam secundum loca accipit diversitatem.... Econtra autem saliva hominis ieiuni quando diu ieiunavit et in praecedenti sero abstinuit, contrariatur omnibus venenosis.

22.1.5 (2:1355): Et si saliva hominis diu ieiuni cuius saliva bene est subtiliata a cibi viscositate, cadit in os vel vulnus scorpionis ver serpentis vel alterius venenati animalis ita quod ad interiora penetret, interficit ipsum animal.

Cf. *Bestiary*: Albertus Magnus, De animalibus 22.12): If the saliva of a man who has fasted for a long time falls into the mouth of a snake, the creature dies immediately.

<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast264.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Aristotle, *History of Animals* 5.17 549b25 (Barnes, 1:867): just as serpents shed their so-called 'old-age' or slough), both directly after birth and in later life; [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Avicenna, See Christopher Lawrence, “The Healing Serpent: The Snake in Medical Iconography,” *Ulster Med J*. 1978; 47(2): 134–140. (p. 137): …the snake retained all its pristine healing power and this was transmitted through scholastic and popular culture. For instance Avicenna the Arabic physician whose *Canon* was the major medical text of the Middle Ages, recommended snake for leprosy. Snake remedies were ubiquitous in the orthodox medicine of the Middle Ages.

See Kathleen Walker-Meikle, “Toxicology and Treatment: Medical Authorities and Snake-bite in the Middle Ages,” Korot. 2014 Dec 1; 22: 85–104 : Bernard de Gordon, quoting Avicenna, noted that some male snakes were more dangerous than the female ones, that snakes in dry places were worse than those in damp areas, hungry snakes worse than those which had just eaten, younger ones were worse than old, and fast-moving ones more dangerous as they could accidentally bite people. [22. de Gordon Bernard. Lilium medicinae. (cit. n. 19), f. 18r.; Avicenna, Canon (cit. n. 4), 4.6.3.21.] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4340534/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Marginal Gloss* on Matt. 10[:16]: SICUT SERPENTES. Serpentis astutia est quod toto corpore caput in quo vita est occultat et protegit. Ita et nostri periculo corporis caput nostrum quod est Christus custodiamus. Vel quod per angustias se coartans, veteri tunica exutus innovatur. Sic intrans per angustam portam, veterem exuit hominem.

<https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?livre=../sources/editions/GLOSS-liber55.xml&chapitre=55_10> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Peter Lombard, *Collectaneorum in Paulum Continuatio*: In Epistolam I at Timothaeum 5 (PL 192.355): Prudenter enim Deus sibi serviri vult, non ut nimietate debiles fiant, et post medicorum suffragia requirant.

Cf. *Fasciculus Morum: a fourteenth-century preacher’s handbook* 6.4, ed. Siegfried Wenzel, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 640-641. Here following Peter Lombard. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Bernard, cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2-2, q. 147, a. 1, ad 2: Non tamen ratio recta tantum de cibo subtrahit ut natura conservari non possit, quia, ut Hieronymus dicit, non differt utrum magno vel parvo tempore te interimas; et quod de rapina holocaustum offert qui vel ciborum nimia egestate, vel manducandi vel somni penuria, immoderate corpus affligit. Cf. De consecratone, D. 5, c. 24, Non mediocriter. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Seneca, *Epistula* 8.5 in Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, trans. Richard M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library 75 (London: Heineman, 1918-1925), 1:37: Hanc ergo sanam ac salubrem formam vitae tenete, ut corpori tantum indulgeatis, quantum bonae valitudini satis est.

Hold fast, then, to this sound and wholesome rule of life; that you indulge the body only so far as is needful for good health.

Cf. *Fasciculus morum: a fourteenth-century preacher’s handbook* ed. Siegfried Wenzel, p. 640-641. Here citing Bernard and Seneca. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Gregory, *Expositio in librum Job* 30.18.63 (PL 76.558): Nam plerumque dum plus justo caro restringitur, etiam ab exercitatione boni operis enervatur, ut ad orationem quoque vel praedicationem non sufficiat, dum incentiva vitiorum in se funditus suffocare festinat. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. *Fasciculus morum: a fourteenth-century preacher’s handbook* ed. Siegfried Wenzel, p. 640-643: Sic penitens in arbitrio discreti sacerdotis, ut per se tantam penitenciam aut tam asperam accipiat, aut eciam ipse sacerdos iniugat, quod desperando illam non deserat.... [↑](#endnote-ref-9)