

WHEREFORE HAVE WE FASTED?

The Ndrangheta is one of the most powerful crime syndicates in the world, and has its base of operation in southern Italy. Its members are evil, yet they are very religious. Vatican News reported:

In Italy and elsewhere, Marian and other Catholic devotions are often maliciously incorporated into mafia rituals, in a distortion of authentic spirituality, as, for example, when statues or images of the Blessed Virgin are made to bow before the houses of mob bosses during processions.

For over one-hundred years they have held their councils at the Sanctuary of Santa Maria di Polsi, a shrine dedicated to Saint Mary. Sergio Nazzaro, an Italian journalist, writer and adviser to the Parliamentary Anti-Mafia Commission, told the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, “Religion is very important in Italy, especially in South Italy. These people [the mafiosi] are also believers and connected to tradition, so they mold the church to their power. They don’t just invade the economy, business and drug market, they also invade religion.” (Davis Klein, “Vatican Addresses the Mafia’s Latest Hostage: The Virgin Mary,” Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 31 August 2020) In response, the Vatican’s Pontifical International Marian Academy established a department to study organized crime “to free the figure of Our Lady from the influence of criminal organizations.” Concerning the Ndrangheta’s rituals, Father Stefano Cecchin, president of the Academy, told Vatican news, “[It] is not religion! It’s superstition.” He said the leaders of the syndicates “teach the people that God is with them [the Ndrangheta]. So they also want to use people’s religious feelings not to lead them to be free, but slaves.” (“Pope Francis: Free Mary from associations with the mafia,” Vatican News, 20 August 2020) Pope Francis wrote a letter to Father Cecchin, exhorting him to free devotion to Mary from “superstructures, powers or conditioning that does not correspond to the Gospel criteria of justice, liberty, honesty, and solidarity.” Rituals are important to the church, but Christians must take care to perform rituals sincerely, and not hypocritically.

In the days of Isaiah the prophet, the people of God were both rebellious and religious. Isaiah said of them, “Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.” (Isaiah 1:4) Concerning the rulers in Jerusalem, Isaiah said, “Thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them.” (Isaiah 1:23) The people were wicked; yet they performed the religious rituals God commanded. Because the people performed their rituals hypocritically, God did not accept them. He said:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. (Isaiah 1:11–15)

They offered blood sacrifices, but their hands were red with the blood of their fellow man. The people said, “Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?” (Isaiah 58:3) The people fasted, and they could not understand why God had no regard for their fasting. It was because they fasted hypocritically. They performed the rituals, but they did not repent of their sins and they continued to do them. They fasted, but on fast days they did not rest from their work, and forbade their workers rest. (Isaiah 58:3) They did not bear their fasting with piety, but were irritable and ill-tempered. What God meant for God, the people did badly. God told them what to do, how to be right with Him. He said:

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:16–18)

The people needed forgiveness for their sins, and, if they would repent for their sins, then God would forgive them. They had to be sorry for their sins, and had to turn away from them to do good. Then God would forgive them, and they would be right with Him. He said, “Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?” (Isaiah 58:5) God commands that His people perform certain rituals for Him, but, more importantly, He commanded them to love Him with all their heart, soul, and strength, which is to say, with everything they have. God has no regard for empty ceremonies, ceremonies without heart and without humility. God said:

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (Isaiah 58:6, 7)

A fast is only meaningful if it is attended with repentance and good works. A fast is sinful if the one fasting does not love his neighbor.

In Jesus’s day, the religious leaders of Israel performed religious services, but they performed them impiously. When they gave alms, they sounded a trumpet before they gave so that men would see them give. When they prayed, they did so in public so that men would see them pray. When they gave alms, they looked gloomy, so that men would know that they fasted. They did give alms, and prayed, and fasted,, not for love of God and man, not to receive praise from God, but to receive praise from men. Jesus said that they would receive the reward they sought, praise from men, but they would receive from God, not praise, but condemnation. He said:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19–21)

The religious leaders of Israel sought to be rewarded by men in this life for their religious acts. The praise of men was the reward they prized. Jesus said that people should seek to be rewarded by God in the next life. Men ought to prize the praise of God, not of men.

Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. (2 Corinthians 5:20, 21)

All men are sinners in need of forgiveness. The apostolic message is that sinful men must be reconciled to God, and that God has provided ground for reconciliation by forgiving men's sins because Christ has made atonement for them.

Saint Paul further wrote:

We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.) Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true; As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things. (2 Corinthians 6:1–10)

God has in Christ extended grace to the Christian. He has promised to forgive the sin of the Christian, but on condition of repentance. It is always time to repent, and it is never too late. The Christian must week by week, day by day, moment by moment, repent of his sins, and strive to do good. The life of the Christian is not easy. It is full of temptation and trial. The Christian may be tempted to particular sins. He may be tempted to forsake God altogether. The Christian must persevere in faith and good works, and by God's grace, he is able to do so. If the Christian gives up everything in this life, yet, if He has Christ, he has everything.

Let us with right hearts perform the rituals God has commanded. Let us always repent of our sins. Let us persevere in faith and good works.

Now unto the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, be glory and dominion, for ever and ever. Amen.