



Anorexics and saints

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Abstract

In the Middle Ages, some Catholic saints fasted frequently. The specialized literature invariably has a critical bias, as if they suffered from a psychopathology. This article counters this view based on Theology, Catholic Doctrine, and Nutrology.

Keywords: Nutrology. Anorexics. Saint. Fasting.

Introduction

Definition of Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia Nervosa (AN), with a prevalence of 0.4-4.3% in young women in the Western world, is characterized by a distorted body image, a desire to be thin, and a feeling of being overweight despite obvious thinness. The likely causes are genetic, social, and psychological determinants [1].

AN can be life-threatening and should be treated. As it is a predominantly mental disorder, no drug or logical intervention is specifically beneficial [1], but comorbidities such as depression and anxiety should be addressed. The prognosis of AN is variable, with some recovering after a single episode, while others have recurrent episodes or a chronic course. Untreated mortality is 5.1/1,000 annually, the highest among psychiatric conditions [1]. Diagnostic criteria for AN, according to the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-5):

A. Restriction of energy intake in relation to needs, leading to a significantly low body mass in the context of age, gender, developmental trajectory, and physical

health. Significantly low body mass is defined as a body mass below the minimum normal body mass or, in the case of children and adolescents, below the minimum expected.

B. Intense fear of gaining body mass or becoming fat, or persistent behavior that interferes with gaining body mass, despite having a significantly low body mass.

C. Disturbance in how one's own body mass or body shape is experienced, undue influence of body mass or body shape on self-evaluation, or persistent failure to recognize the severity of current low body mass [2,3].

Types:

1. Restrictive type: During the past three months, the individual has not engaged in recurrent episodes of binge eating or purging behavior (i.e., self-induced vomiting or misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas). This subtype describes presentations in which weight loss is achieved primarily through dieting, fasting, and excessive exercise.

2. Binge eating purging type: During the past three months, the individual has engaged in recurrent episodes of binge eating purging (i.e., self-induced vomiting or misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas).

Development

Anorexia of Catholic Saints According to Science

The existence of eating disorders in other cultures and past centuries is of great psychopathological interest, as it places the issue of pathogenesis and pathoplasticity in psychiatry at the center of the

discussion and makes relative the influence of modernity, often considered the main and sometimes the only causal factor. Rudolph Bell (1985) studied the lives of more than 250 Italian women saints and blessings of the Catholic Church, using autobiographical writings, letters, testimonies of confessors, and canonical reports [2]. Self-imposed fasting does not necessarily mean an eating disorder. Several peoples of Antiquity encouraged voluntary fasting as a religious practice and saw abstinence from food as a form of purification.

In Ancient Egypt, anyone who wanted to be initiated into the mysteries of Isis and Osiris had to go between seven and 40 days without eating. Among the Greeks and Romans, people fasted before consulting the oracles, and Old Testament prophets fasted in preparation for religious experiences and divine revelations. Fasting is widespread among various types and stages of civilization for various purposes. It may be an act of penance or propitiation; a preparatory rite before some act of sacramental nourishment or initiation; a mourning ceremony; one of a series of purification rites; a means of inducing dreams and visions; a method of adding strength to magical rites [4].

The various prescriptions for fasting dealt with both bodily purification and deliverance from disease, as well as inner purification, spiritual renewal, and reconnection (religion) with the divine (transcendent). We know about the 40-day fast of Moses on Mount Horeb, of the prophet Elijah and Christ in the desert, and of the 50-day fast of Buddha (563-483 BC) and of Muhammad (570-632 AD). For Muslims, the fasting month of Ramadan is still sanctified today, as is a strict dietary rule during pilgrimages to and from Mecca. An Islamic proverb says: "What the doctor cannot cure will be cured in Ramadan." [5].

The Catholic Church itself, which preaches fasting, is concerned about the excessive abstinence from food practiced in monasteries, to the point of restricting the canonization of fasting saints. In the cultural and theological context of the Middle Ages, asceticism was one of the only ways for women to overcome or elevate themselves spiritually, with women being to men as the flesh or body is to the spirit or soul [6]. Fragile women, more predisposed to sin, and less rational could find the path to Christ only in the Eucharist or by self-flagellation to the point of submission and abandonment of the body.

One of the "anorexic saints" was the Italian Maria Magdalena de Pazzi (Figure 1), born in Florence on April 2, 1566. Her choice of the ecclesiastical name of Mary Magdalene, a converted prostitute in Christian history, displeased Catherine's aristocratic family, who had given

her this name to honor Saint Catherine of Siena [7].

Figure 1. Saint Mary Magdalene de Pazzi (1566-1607).



Source: Cordás and Weinberg [7].

In 1585, when she was nearly 20 years old, and claiming to be guided by God, she began to restrict her diet to bread and water, except on Sundays, when she ate, always in small quantities, with only some leftovers left at the meal by the other sisters. This young woman suffered from continuous illnesses, but said she was happy to suffer for Christ: "Pati, non mori" ("To suffer, Lord, and not to die"). Some family aspects described in anorexics are of great psychoanalytic interest. Mary Magdalene was an only child, a perfectionist, and a rule-abiding woman.

A determined child who was always praised for her obedience, she would cry and fall ill when contradicted. Her mother, like Catherine of Siena's, was authoritarian, and it was with her that Mary Magdalene fought great battles until she entered the convent. Interestingly, the adoption of the name Mary Magdalene was also a choice influenced by the writings of Catherine of Siena, who cites Mary Magdalene as a model for herself, because, after the death of Christ, she would have fasted for 33 years in a row. Thus, there seems to be no doubt that Mary Magdalene de Pazzi read the writings of Catherine of Siena (another supposed "anorexic saint") and was influenced by this saint's ideas of asceticism. Catherine of Siena's life (Figure 2) was characterized by an

extreme form of fasting, her diet being restricted to only water diluted with wine and vegetables, a self-induced starvation regime that may have played an important role in her death at the age of 33 [8]. Motivated by deep religious beliefs, her condition was classified as *anorexia mirabilis* (AM) or the English term holy anorexic (also known as *inédia prodigiosa*), a retrospective diagnosis to which several authors converged, regardless of the etiology [9].

AN has been known since the Middle Ages, but a confident distinction from AM is difficult for this historical period [8]. Although AM is no longer diagnosed in modern times, AN has been increasingly diagnosed in the 20th and 21st centuries. However, it is still unclear whether this is due to an increase in prevalence or awareness among health professionals. A recent meta-analysis has shown that eating disorders have been showing a high prevalence, higher in women, worldwide [9].

Figure 2. Saint Catherine of Siena (1.347-1.380).



Source: Cordás and Weinberg [7].

In the pathobiographical descriptions of Saint Catherine, one element stands out: her abstinence from food had been extreme and she had the habit of ingesting bitter foods and tasteless drinks. Sweet foods became her total enemy, and Catherine suffered greatly when eating them [10]. From a neurophysiological point of view, it is worth noting that TRP (Transient Receptor Potential) channels, especially TRPV1 and TRPM8, play a role in taste, pain perception, and energy

expenditure modulation [11]. Some defects in the functioning of these channels may explain at least part of the symptoms found in ancient cases. Individuals with AN show greater sensitivity to food disgust compared to control patients. It has been suggested that disgust may originate as a defense mechanism against the ingestion of contaminated or poisonous foods.

Another ancient case of a medieval anorexic saint was that of Clare of Assisi (1194–1253 AD). Although the symptomatological spectrum resembles that of Saint Catherine, leading to a common diagnosis of AM, a clear indication of dysgeusia cannot be identified in this case. The case of Catherine of Siena can thus be considered one of the oldest true descriptions of dysgeusia. Furthermore, because of this, a convincing paleoneurophysiological similarity between AM and AN can be proposed.

The clinician, based on the self-induced weight loss, the resistance to eating against all logical arguments and evidence of physical risks, the bulimic episodes, and the purging behavior, would not hesitate to make the diagnosis of AN purging subtype [7], especially if he or she were unaware of the physical and mental benefits of well-conducted fasting.

Benefits of Fasting

1. Rejuvenation - Aging may be driven by epigenomic remodeling, which promotes the development of age-related diseases. Because epigenetic modifications are modifiable by environmental changes and exhibit immense plasticity, they can be used to transduce external signals and regulate aging through gene regulation. Caloric restriction can promote changes in gene expression and attenuate age-related changes in many organisms [12].

2. Cardiovascular Risk - The Comprehensive Evaluation of the Long-Term Effects of Reducing Energy Intake (CALERIE) was a randomized trial of non-obese adults who reduced their daily calorie intake by 25% and ate whatever they wanted for 2 years [13]. CALERIE researchers reported that calorie restriction improved several cardiometabolic risk factors, including cholesterol levels, blood pressure, C-reactive protein, and glucose tolerance.

3. Other diseases: Clinical trials have shown that intermittent fasting has benefits for many conditions such as obesity, diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and neurological disorders. Fasting has biological and spiritual effects, acting as a tool for intervention, prevention, and treatment of chronic non-communicable diseases, and is becoming increasingly popular. A growing level of scientific evidence has demonstrated the beneficial effects of fasting on human health. Its classic indication in Medicine is overweight

with comorbidities and obesity. Interest in fasting exploded in America after Japanese biologist Yoshinori Ohsumi was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 2016. Ohsumi proved that fasting stimulates the process of autophagy, a mechanism by which cells self-degrade, allowing their renewal and contributing to longevity. Therefore, experts have advocated that medical student should know the basics of how fasting affects metabolism and how cells and organs respond adaptively to it. They need to know the main indications for fasting (obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cancers) and how to implement fasting prescriptions to maximize their long-term benefits [14].

And Fasting Reaches the ICUs

For healthcare professionals, the patient's refusal to eat during acute illness is distressing [15]. This is partly physiological: the anorexia of acute illness [16]. Wild animals, when sick, fast and chew medicinal herbs. To combat the catabolism of critical illness, Nutritional Therapy (NT) is recommended since prolonged underfeeding contributes to catabolism. Numerous studies have associated increased nutritional intake with improved outcomes in critically ill patients (CI). However, a causal relationship has not been observed, since food tolerance is closely associated with the severity of the disease, with better food tolerance occurring in less ill patients. As demonstrated in a recent meta-analysis, no randomized controlled trial (RCT) in critically ill patients (CI) found any benefit from early full NT compared with caloric restriction [17].

Based on this evidence, current guidelines for NT in CI have shifted from promoting early full feeding to less generous artificial feeding in the first week of critical illness. The lack of benefit from early full NT in RCTs is due to the continued suppression of the fasting response. Although fasting has been considered a detrimental process in CI, a normal diet involves alternating feeding periods with fasting intervals. Recent evidence suggests that the lack of benefit from early full feeding may be explained by the method of artificial nutrition delivery (i.e., continuous). Alternating feeding/fasting intervals may be superior compared to continuous energy supply [18].

Protective mechanisms of intermittent feeding include activation of the fasting response, which may promote cellular recovery via stimulation of autophagy and ketogenesis [19]. Pathways activated by fasting maintain normal cellular integrity and function. Part of the beneficial effects of fasting on health are mediated by the activation of autophagy. Autophagy is a cellular process by which cytoplasmic content is digested in the lysosome after being delivered to the lysosome in an intermediate vesicle called an autophagosome [14].

Suffering according to classical thinkers

Caring for those who suffer, especially the most vulnerable, appears in history with Christianity [20]. The idea of having compassion for strangers in ancient times is strange and not only strange but, for many, indecent, like the philosophers of paganism. Plato, in his work *The Republic* says: "Medicine and jurisprudence will only care for citizens who are well-formed in body and soul, leaving those who are physically defective to die". Seneca says: "We suffocate the little monsters we even drown children when they are born defective and abnormal. It is not anger but reason that invites us to separate the healthy elements from the harmful elements". The idea that weak, elderly, or somehow sick elements could be sacrificed for the sake of the health of the "polis" was omnipresent. This anti-sacrificial Christian view of life led pagan thinkers to believe that this would be a weak religion that would weaken the state. The pagan premise that human life is not sacred is based on the concept that suffering would be almost unnatural, as if, when we suffer, life loses its meaning and the natural state of human life is the absence of suffering.

The idea that suffering and sacrifice have a transcendent meaning and can mean redemption is completely absent in this type of thinking. For pagans, life would be almost a natural accident that would end with the extinction of matter, with physical death. This, of course, completely contradicts Christian eschatology and the anthropological implications of Christianity.

Catholic saints fasted and sacrificed themselves. This would be absurd and unnecessary according to pagan and postmodern thought. This idea that sacrifice can be spoken about in a trivialized way dates back to before the Christian era. In Plato's *Dialogue of Gorgias* [21], we discuss Socrates and the sophist Callicles: "The right thing was the successful one", according to the latter. In one of the passages of the dialogue, Callicles says that "nature itself is responsible for proving that it is fair to have the noblest individual more than the villain and the strongest than the weakest. With an abundance of examples, nature shows that things happen this way and that among animals and men, in cities and all races, justice demands that the strongest dominate the inferior and have more than them" as if it were a continuum between human beings and animals and that man was not a being created by divine transcendence. This was written over 4,000 years ago, prefiguring the idea of materialistic morality in modernity.

If we evaluate modern thinkers, in Machiavelli, we have this defense of sacrifice and the notion that Catholicism is a weak religion [22]. For civil religion to prevail as a state religion, Rousseau criticizes

Christianity above all, which would not have the basis of a national religion. "Christians are only concerned with the heavenly homeland, with the future life, forgetting to live in the earthly homeland because "the essential thing is to reach paradise [...]" (Rousseau, 2013, p. 222). Consequently, Christianity would be a religion that leads man to love heaven, leaving aside the love of earthly things, of the State. Because of this, this religion does not have the mold of a religion focused on the State, but only on the things of heaven. Therefore, they are not willing to fight, much less die, for the State in which they live."

According to Machiavelli, Christianity only sanctifies the "weak" and humble, men who are fond of the contemplative life and not the active life. For him, the supreme good is humility and contempt for the goods of the world. The pagans, on the other hand, gave the utmost importance to the vigor of the body, to everything that would lead men to become robust and courageous. Niccolo Machiavelli argues that power, honor, and glory are goods to be pursued and valued, contrary to the idea of angelic Christian virtue (free from temptations). Man could obtain goods on earth and should fight for them, without aiming for heavenly rewards. The pagans gave the utmost importance to the greatness of the soul, the vigor of the body, and everything that contributed to forming robust and courageous men.

According to Nietzsche [23] "Because Christianity pushes the doctrine of disinterestedness and love to the forefront, the individual was taken over by Christianity in such an important way, placed in such an absolute way, that it could no longer be sacrificed: but the species exists only through human sacrifice (...) All 'souls' would be equal before God: but this is precisely the most dangerous of all possible valuations! Individuals are equated, and thus the species is called into question, a praxis is favored that ends up being the ruin of the species: Christianity is the counter-principle opposed to natural selection. If the degenerate and sick ('the Christian') should have as much value as the healthy ('the pagan'), or even more so according to Pascal's view of health and illness, then the natural course of development is reversed, and unnature has become law (...) This universal love for men is, in practice, the prerogative of all the suffering, unsuccessful and degenerates: it has ruined and dampened the strength, the responsibility, the high duty of sacrificing men (...) The species needs the decline of the failed, the weak, and the degenerate: but Christianity resorts precisely to them as a conservative power, and this makes that instinct of the weak, in itself already so powerful, to spare themselves, to preserve themselves and to maintain themselves reciprocally,

increase even more."

The Sacrifice According to the Saints

Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, "When Jesus was born, he was laid on the hard straw of the manger. But why did Mary, who had longed so much for the birth of her Son, who loved him so much, not hold him in her arms instead of exposing him to such great suffering on a very hard bed? There are various explanations for this mystery, but among them, I like the one given by Saint Peter Damian the most. The newborn Jesus wanted to be laid on straw to teach us the mortification of the senses. The world had been lost to the satisfactions of the senses; Adam had been lost to them, and then his descendants until today. The eternal Word came down from heaven to teach us the love of suffering, and he began to teach us this from childhood, choosing for himself the harshest sufferings that a child can endure. It was, therefore, he who inspired Mary, instead of holding him in her tender arms, to place him on that hard bed, so that he would feel the cold of the cave and the stings of the feet more from the rough straw" [24].

Saint José María Escrivá: "This is the truth of the Christian: surrender and love - love for God and, through Him, for our neighbor, based on sacrifice. The delicious love that makes the soul happy is based on pain: love without renunciation is not possible". Reasons for penance? Redress, reparation, petition, thanksgiving; a means to progress...; for you, for me, for others, for your family, for your country, for the Church... And a thousand other reasons. Mortification is the drawbridge that allows us to enter the castle of prayer.

The Christian vocation is one of sacrifice, penance, and atonement. We must make reparation for our sins and for all the sins of men. We must closely follow in the footsteps of Christ: always carrying in our body the mortification, the self-denial of Christ, his sacrifice on the Cross, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. Our path is one of immolation, and this renunciation will bring us gaudium cum pace, joy, and peace. Mortification is the salt of our life. And the best mortification is that which combats - in small details, throughout the day - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Mortifications that do not mortify others, that make us more delicate, more understanding, more open. We will not be mortified if we are susceptible, concerned only with our own selfishness, if we crush others, if we do not know how to deprive ourselves of what is superfluous and, at times, of what is necessary; if we become sad when things do not go as we had planned. On the contrary, we will be mortified if we know how to do everything for everyone in order to save everyone. "We must walk

without fear of life and without fear of death, without avoiding pain at any cost, which for a Christian is always a means of purification.” [25].

“If you can endure fasting, you do well to fast a little longer than the Church requires, because fasting, in addition to elevating the spirit to God, represses sensuality, facilitates virtues and increases merits. It brings us great benefit in mortifying gluttony and in subjecting the sensual appetite and the body to the laws of the spirit; and, even if we do not fast much, the enemy is very afraid of those whom he knows know how to fast.” [26].

Discussion and Conclusion

Many scientific articles address the anorexia of Catholic Saints with prejudiced and reductionist bias, considering sacrifice and suffering as something bad and unnecessary. Suffering is something inherent to the human condition: “These things I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but take courage. I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Suffering that comes to us deliberately and involuntarily. Deliberate when we are part of the cause: our mistakes, excesses, sins, and that bring their price: “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Involuntary when, unexpectedly, we are afflicted by injustices, misfortunes, accidents. If life is a “vale of tears” why seek more problems like the nuns of the Monasteries? Mortification and voluntary penances are part of the Church’s tradition and serve to dominate the instincts, since “the spirit is strong, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). “See what fasting can do. It cures illnesses, dries up the body’s superfluous fluids, expels evil spirits, drives away wrong thoughts, gives greater lucidity to the mind, purifies the heart, sanctifies the body, and ultimately leads man to the throne of God. Fasting is a great force and provides great success.” Saint Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (4th century).

Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, said: “Let your food be your medicine; let your medicine be your food. Cure your illness by fasting rather than by medicine.” The “suffering” of confinement, of those seeking to overcome “the lust of the flesh, of the eye and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16), should not be heavy. Jesus said: “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke, for it is easy and easy” (Matthew 11:28-30). And it must be sincere: “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces so that others may see them fasting. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward in full.”

CRedit

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