

Should a Christian be a Foodie?

One of the highly celebrated pleasures of our time is fine cuisine. All manner of foodie hotspots have sprung up as TV shows and social media continue to popularize delicious, unique food. But should Christians partake in the foodie culture?

Not long ago, Christians saw abstaining from worldly pleasures as a way to deny the desires of the flesh and thereby grow in spiritual holiness, preparing oneself for the future life. They took St. Paul's warning in his *Epistle to the Galatians* quite seriously: "So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh craves what is contrary to the Spirit..."

Traditionally on Fridays, Christians would abstain from a variety of foods as a way of weekly recognition of Christ's crucifixion on a Friday. During Advent (the run up to Christmas) and Lent (the run up to Easter), Christians would fast from many foods, including meat and even milk-based foods, as a means to deny themselves worldly pleasures and prepare themselves for the coming spiritual celebration.

It's been said that St. Francis of Assisi (circa 1200 A.D.), the child of a very wealthy man, took up a vow of poverty and a denial of the flesh that even included sprinkling charcoal upon his food so as to not enjoy a worldly pleasure that might distract him from seeking God. St. Augustine (circa 400 A.D.) wrote in *The City of God*:

"For there is pleasure in eating and drinking, pleasure also in sexual intercourse. But when it is preferred to virtue, it is desired for its own sake, and virtue is chosen only for its sake, and to effect nothing else than the attainment or

preservation of bodily pleasure. And this, indeed, is to make life hideous; for where virtue is the slave of pleasure it no longer deserves the name of virtue.”

In *The Confessions*, St. Augustine took his reasoning so far as to argue that eating until one is full is a pleasure in and of itself, and something to avoid. Naturally, he believed that eating and drinking are necessary to the health of the body, but that one experienced pleasure in the transition from hunger to fullness:

“...while I am passing from the discomfort of emptiness to the content of replenishing, in the very passage the snare of lustfulness besets me. For that passing is pleasure; nor is there any other way to pass through... What is enough for health is too little for pleasure.”

It may come as a surprise to learn that the Romans had a foodie culture. St. Basil the Great (circa 350 A.D.), writing in *On Reading Greek Literature*, warned fellow Christians not to be slaves to their appetites or to engage in the Roman foodie culture. In his writings we can even see similarities to our modern foodie culture.

“What else, indeed, than devote ourselves to the care of our souls, keeping all our leisure free from other things. Accordingly, we should not be slaves of the body, except so far as is strictly necessary ... supplying the belly with what it cannot do without, but not with sweet dainties as those do who look everywhere for table-dressers and cooks and scour every land and sea, bringing tribute, as it were, to a stern master...”

Our grocery stores and restaurants are now full of the sweet dainties cooks scoured every land and sea to find, bringing tribute to our taste buds and bellies. And Christians join in the pleasure of it all.

One could argue that these foods are naturally available and

that, from a Christian viewpoint, God has given us taste buds and spices for a reason. Nonetheless, do the early Church Fathers referenced above have a point about eating as pleasure? Does today's foodie culture, with its exquisite tastes and picturesque plating, distract one from growing in virtue, from controlling the desires of the flesh? And while for many non-Christians it doesn't seem like an issue, for a Christian, should it be?