Gaspar Loarte published The Exercise of the Christian Life in 1557 (just a year after the death of Ignatius de Loyola) as the Spanish Jesuit served as the rector of a Jesuit college in Genoa. The slim volume provided prayers, meditations, and general advice to Christians who desired to live a more devout life. Exemplifying the guidelines and demands associated with the popular piety of the mid-sixteenth century, the text proved to be a bestseller. In the selection below, Loarte offers his remedies for the sin of gluttony—more specifically the five remedies for the five types of gluttony. His warnings and instructions are clear, as are the stakes of this particular sin, one that joins with lust to serve as a “door to, and beginning of, many” other sins. This section is excerpted from Loarte’s full text, as translated by Charles Keenan in The Exercises of the Christian Life. To learn more about the title, please visit jesuitsources.com.

The other vice of the flesh is gluttony, which greatly aids lust, for the full stomach and overly pampered flesh are easily lit on fire and make you fall into the stench of lust, as divine scripture repeatedly warns us. It is necessary to arm yourself diligently against this vice, which is the door to, and beginning of, many others, and the victory over the others depends on the victory over this one. For this reason, those holy, ancient fathers who were in the desert attended with greatest diligence to overcome this vice, because they understood that if this first one was not conquered, the other evils could hardly be overcome. And so we do see that the devil often begins to tempt us through this vice, knowing how many evils it is the beginning of, as he did with our first fathers, and the first temptation that he proposed to Christ our redeemer was of this matter. Therefore, to defend yourself from this vice, which is so harmful and the origin of so many other sins, seize upon the following advice and remedies.

The first is that, when you are eating, try to observe five things, which will protect you from the five kinds of gluttony that Saint Gregory names.

The first regards the time when a person eats before the predetermined time and hour, which you should abstain from doing, striving not to eat more than twice a day—that is, at lunch and dinner, at the usual hours kept by those who live their life in a more orderly fashion. One should not eat outside of these two hours without notable need. And if sometime you feel tempted to eat before the proper time without a reason, you should make an effort and resist it, as that monk did (about whom was written in the life of the holy fathers) who, being tempted to eat in the morning before the usual time, tricked himself by saying “Now let us wait until the third hour, and then we will eat,” and when it was the third hour, he said, “Now let us work for a little while,” and then, “Now let us say some psalms,”
“Now let us steep the biscuit” (mettiamo a molle il biscotto), and entertaining himself in this way he continued until the ninth hour, which was the usual hour of his lunch, and thus he was perfectly freed from this vice.

The second kind of gluttony regards the quality of one’s eating; that is, not to eat food that is too delicate and delectable. You should abstain from this, being content to eat such foods that can sustain your body and not pleasure it, as Saint Bernard advises, and if they seem coarse or without flavor to you, use the good and delicate sauce that the same Saint Bernard teaches—hunger—and they will become flavorful. Remember the great abstinence of those ancient fathers in Egypt, to whom eating something cooked seemed superfluous, as Saint Jerome tells us. Shame yourself, therefore, with their rigor, and do not desire to eat delicate food, in order not to be like those members of the people of Israel who desired meat in the desert, which provoked the wrath of God against them.

The third kind of gluttony regards the quantity of food: that is, eating more than what you need to sustain your nature, which, as Saint Jerome says, makes it so that the more the body is filled, the more the soul is diminished. You should abstain from such excess, because according to the advice of Saint Augustine, one should take food like medicine, something that one does not take in great amounts. Be mindful, therefore, that your heart not be aggravated by excess and drunkenness, as our Savior admonishes us, so that you are able to flee from the future wrath and many evils that proceed from this vice.

The fourth kind of gluttony regards at what times and in what ways one eats with too much zeal and greed, which is shown when a person eats in a hurry and messily, and looks at his or her food too attentively. The wise man rebukes this, saying, “Do not wish to be desirous of every dish, and do not fall upon all food,” being completely focused on the physical food that you eat, but rather listen to some lecture, if there is one, or raise your mind to God with some devout thought, or interject some psalm or prayer, so that they thus might be equally pleasing to your body and your soul.

The fifth and last kind of gluttony is caring too much and seeking out different foods and tastes, which one ought to shun as something very blameworthy, in order not to be like those whom [Paul] the Apostle says took their own stomachs to be like a god, which they sought to serve with the care and solicitude that is required for service of the true God. As a remedy for this and all the other kinds of gluttony, the following considerations will also help you, which you can have as a second remedy:

First, consider how much more the trouble and heaviness that remain in your stomach after eating too much bothers you than the many and delicate foods can delight you, whose taste and delight does not last longer than the food passes from the mouth to the throat. This delight, as soon as it has passed, does not remain anything more than a trace or memory, as if it had never existed. And this you can better understand, noting that nothing remains of everything you have eaten and drank in all your life, and that nothing remains of all the meals, all the flavors, and the delectable food that you have tasted. See how everything has vanished, as if it never existed.
Take note, then, that a pleasure that passes so quickly may have already passed when you feel tempted by it. Take no thought of obeying what your flesh desires.

Second, consider the dangers and ugly disorders that are born from this sin. First, the strain and toil necessary to satisfy the gluttony; second, the many bodily illnesses that follow from disordered eating; third, that it clouds the mind, such that a person is unable to make spiritual exercises; fourth, the eternal hunger and thirst that happen later, to which not even a drop of water will be granted, as one sees in the story of the rich glutton. Remember, too, what will remain of a delicately nourished body after death.

The third remedy is to remember the abstinence of Christ and his disciples, who plucked corn on account of hunger, and how the Lord fasted for forty days in the desert, and the gall that was given to him to drink in his thirst when he was on the cross, which you ought to remember every time you are at the table to eat.

The fourth remedy is that you often remember that eternal, heavenly dinner to which our God, the redeemer, signified to us in one of his parables, to which we are invited, and think that—wishing to enjoy such a happy and regal dinner—it is necessary to abstain from lunch in this life, so that you can be better able to fill yourself later, just as on earth someone who is invited to a magnificent and splendid dinner often wants to eat with moderation at lunch in order not to lose their appetite for dinner.

The last remedy, and a very sure one, is to shun (as much as it is possible for you) occasions for gluttony, such as meals and feasts, where one sees such abundance and a variety of dishes, and so much food and wine and delicate and delectable fruits, among which it is very difficult to remain sober, since there are so many things that incite us to gluttony. Remember what the sacred scripture says of our mother, Eve, who saw the tree that was good to eat from, beautiful, and pleasing to the eyes, and she took its fruit and ate it, giving some to her husband, and in this way was the cause of so much harm to herself and the entire world. You can likewise fall in this if you do not avoid placing yourself in similar dangers.

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