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Food Obsession

Americans are obsessed with food. In this way, we have changed little from the 13th and 14th centuries. Although obsession with food is now largely a secular passion, women's relationship with food seems to have changed very little. Women still use food as a form of control when they feel they have no control over their lives. Women also still use food as a way to conform to a cultural ideal – saints in the 13th century, movie stars in the 21st.

Looking back, the obsession with food seems strange, until one considers how truly food obsessed American culture is. More than half of Americans are overweight, and the diet industry is a billion dollar industry. Thousands of young women have eating disorders. What was once called fasting is now called anorexia. And while it seems that the reasons for fasting versus anorexia are drastically different, in many ways they are both about control. Women in the 13th and 14th centuries who had almost zero control over their lives attempted to control some aspect of their lives by controlling food intake. Even in this they were not always allowed complete control, since male priests set the rules and distributed the Eucharist. In the same way today, young girls who feel like they have no control over their lives use eating as a form of control.

Although the stories of women not eating (except for the Eucharist) for years are deeply disturbing, at the same time it is possible to understand why they did it. There was only one relationship in their lives they felt they could control; their relationship with food, and through food, God.