



## Food addiction in the Christian Patristic Tradition

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Dear Editor,

It is well-known that food addiction (FA) is a behavioral addiction characterized by compulsive consumption of palatable foods (e.g., high fat and/or sugar content) and linked with a marked activation of the reward system (mesolimbic pathway) in the brain [1, 2]. Although FA is associated with obesity and eating disorders, it is currently not an official diagnosis in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and generally its classification as a clinical eating disorder remains a subject of increasing scientific interest and debate [1, 2]. With this letter, I would like to present some interesting views derived from the Christian Patristic Tradition related to this abnormal eating behavior. In particular, according to the Christian Patristic Tradition, the morbid desire for consuming highly palatable foods is characterized in Greek by the term *λαίμαργία* (*laimargía*) and belongs to the category of “psychosomatic passions”, i.e., bad habits which destroy the human body and soul and arise through repeated falls into sin which urge the individual to commit the particular sin over and over again [3]. Moreover, this abnormal eating behavior is motivated by the achievement of pleasure [4]. It is obvious that the term “passion” as used in the Christian Patristic Tradition to some extent embodies the meaning of the modern medical term “addiction”, and the Greek term *λαίμαργία* can be considered as synonymous with the modern medical term “FA”. In addition, activation of the reward system which plays a central role in the neurobiology of pleasure and addiction can effectively interpret the compulsive consumption of highly palatable foods observed both

in individuals with *λαίμαργία* and in individuals with FA [1]. A characteristic example of *λαίμαργία* in the Bible is the eating behavior, essentially food and fat addiction, of the priest Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, for which they were punished by death by God (see 1 Samuel 2:12–17.34 4:11). It is remarkable that several Christian Church Fathers, such as Saint Dorotheus of Gaza (c. 505–c. 565 AD) and Saint John Cassian (c. 360–435 AD), centuries before, had distinguished the passion of *λαίμαργία* from the passion of binge eating, *γαστριμαργία* (*gastrimargía*) in Greek, an abnormal eating behavior characterized by an irrepressible morbid craving to consume food beyond bodily needs, a loss of control while eating and continued consumption despite negative consequences, in other words, repeated overeating episodes [4]. Nowadays, the Greek terms *λαίμαργία* and *γαστριμαργία* are considered as synonymous and in most modern dictionaries are both translated as “gluttony”. Although the two entities in the Christian Patristic Tradition are passions (addictions) motivated by the achievement of pleasure, the Greek term *γαστριμαργία* embodies the meaning of the modern eating disorders characterized by repeated overeating episodes (e.g., bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder), but the Greek term *λαίμαργία* embodies the meaning of FA. This distinction does not exclude that these entities (*λαίμαργία* and *γαστριμαργία*) can coexist or be overlapping, as for example, FA and binge eating disorder [1]. The above confirm the timeless existence of abnormal eating behaviors in humans and makes Apostle Paul’s words also timeless: “*Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be mastered by anything*” (1 Corinthians 6:12).

This letter is part of the Topical Collection on Food and Addiction.

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