

# Pope St. Leo the Great's Lenten Sermons

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Sermons on Lent

## **Sermon 39**

### **On Lent, I.**

#### **I. The benefits of abstinence shown by the example of the Hebrews**

In former days, when the people of the Hebrews and all the tribes of Israel were oppressed for their scandalous sins by the grievous tyranny of the Philistines, in order that they might be able to overcome their enemies, as the sacred story declares, they restored their powers of mind and body by the injunction of a fast. For they understood that they had deserved that hard and wretched subjection for their neglect of God's commands, and evil ways, and that it was in vain for them to strive with arms unless they had first withstood their sin. Therefore abstaining from food and drink, they applied the discipline of strict correction to themselves, and in order to conquer their foes, first conquered the allurements of the palate in themselves. And thus it came about that their fierce enemies and cruel taskmasters yielded to them when fasting, whom they had held in subjection when full. And so we too, dearly beloved, who are set in the midst of many oppositions and conflicts, may be cured by a little carefulness, if only we will use the same means. For our case is almost the same as theirs, seeing that, as they were attacked by foes in the flesh so are we chiefly by spiritual enemies. And if we can conquer them by God's grace enabling us to correct our ways, the strength of our bodily enemies also will give way before us, and by our self-amendment we shall weaken those who were rendered formidable to us, not by their own merits but by our shortcomings.

#### **II. Use Lent to vanquish the enemy, and be thus preparing for Eastertide**

Accordingly, dearly-beloved, that we may be able to overcome all our enemies, let us seek Divine aid by the observance of the heavenly bidding, knowing that we cannot otherwise prevail against our adversaries, unless we prevail against our own selves. For we have many encounters with our own selves: the flesh desires one thing against the spirit, and the spirit another thing against the flesh. And in this disagreement, if the desires of the body be stronger, the mind will disgracefully lose its proper dignity, and it will be most disastrous for that to serve which ought to have ruled. But if the mind, being subject to its Ruler, and delighting in gifts from above, shall have trampled under foot the allurements of earthly pleasure, and shall not have allowed sin to reign in its mortal body, reason will maintain a well-ordered supremacy, and its strongholds no strategy of spiritual wickednesses will cast down: because man has then only true peace and true freedom when the flesh is ruled by the judgment of the mind, and the mind is directed by the will of God. And although this state of preparedness, dearly-beloved, should always be maintained that our ever-watchful foes may be overcome by unceasing diligence, yet now it must be the more anxiously sought for and the more zealously cultivated when the designs of our subtle foes themselves are conducted with keener craft than ever. For knowing that the most hallowed

days of Lent are now at hand, in the keeping of which all past slothfulnesses are chastised, all negligences alerted for, they direct all the force of their spite on this one thing, that they who intend to celebrate the Lord's holy Passover may be found unclean in some matter, and that cause of offense may arise where propitiation ought to have been obtained.

### **III. Fights are necessary to prove our Faith**

As we approach then, dearly-beloved, the beginning of Lent, which is a time for the more careful serving of the Lord, because we are, as it were, entering on a kind of contest in good works, let us prepare our souls for fighting with temptations, and understand that the more zealous we are for our salvation, the more determined must be the assaults of our opponents. But stronger is He that is in us than He that is against us 1 John 4:4, and through Him are we powerful in whose strength we rely: because it was for this that the Lord allowed Himself to be tempted by the tempter, that we might be taught by His example as well as fortified by His aid. For He conquered the adversary, as you have heard, by quotations from the law, not by actual strength, that by this very thing He might do greater honour to man, and inflict a greater punishment on the adversary by conquering the enemy of the human race not now as God but as Man. He fought then, therefore, that we too might fight thereafter: He conquered that we too might likewise conquer. For there are no works of power, dearly-beloved, without the trials of temptations, there is no faith without proof, no contest without a foe, no victory without conflict. This life of ours is in the midst of snares, in the midst of battles; if we do not wish to be deceived, we must watch: if we want to overcome, we must fight. And therefore the most wise Solomon says, My son in approaching the service of God prepare your soul for temptation Sirach 2:1. For He being a man full of the wisdom of God, and knowing that the pursuit of religion involves laborious struggles, foreseeing too the danger of the fight, forewarned the intending combatant; lest haply, if the tempter came upon him in his ignorance, he might find him unready and wound him unawares.

### **IV. The Christian's armour is both for defense and for attack**

So, dearly-beloved, let us who instructed in Divine learning come wittingly to the present contest and strife, hear the Apostle when he says, for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of this dark world, against spiritual wickedness in heavenly things Ephesians 6:12, and let us not forget that these our enemies feel it is against them all is done that we strive to do for our salvation, and that by the very fact of our seeking after some good thing we are challenging our foes. For this is an old-standing quarrel between us and them fostered by the devil's ill-will, so that they are tortured by our being justified, because they have fallen from those good things to which we, God helping us, are advancing. If, therefore, we are raised, they are prostrated: if we are strengthened, they are weakened. Our cures are their blows, because they are wounded by our wounds' cure. Stand, therefore, dearly-beloved, as the Apostle says, having the loins of your mind girt in truth, and your feet shod in the preparation of the gospel of peace, in all things taking the shield of faith in which you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the evil one, and put on the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God Ephesians 6:14-17. See, dearly-beloved, with

what mighty weapons, with what impregnable defences we are armed by our Leader, who is famous for His many triumphs, the unconquered Master of the Christian warfare. He has girt our loins with the belt of chastity, He has shod our feet with the bonds of peace: because the unbelted soldier is quickly vanquished by the suggester of immodesty, and he that is unshod is easily bitten by the serpent. He has given the shield of faith for the protection of our whole body; on our head has He set the helmet of salvation; our right hand has He furnished with a sword, that is with the word of Truth: that the spiritual warrior may not only be safe from wounds, but also may have strength to wound his assailant.

#### **V. Abstinence not only from food but from other evil desires, especially from wrath, is required in Lent**

Relying, therefore, dearly-beloved, on these arms, let us enter actively and fearlessly on the contest set before us: so that in this fasting struggle we may not rest satisfied with only this end, that we should think abstinence from food alone desirable. For it is not enough that the substance of our flesh should be reduced, if the strength of the soul be not also developed. When the outer man is somewhat subdued, let the inner man be somewhat refreshed; and when bodily excess is denied to our flesh, let our mind be invigorated by spiritual delights. Let every Christian scrutinise himself, and search severely into his inmost heart: let him see that no discord cling there, no wrong desire be harboured. Let chasteness drive incontinence far away; let the light of truth dispel the shades of deception; let the swellings of pride subside; let wrath yield to reason; let the darts of ill-treatment be shattered, and the chidings of the tongue be bridled; let thoughts of revenge fall through, and injuries be given over to oblivion. In fine, let every plant which the heavenly Father has not planted be removed by the roots Matthew 15:13 . For then only are the seeds of virtue well nourished in us, when every foreign germ is uprooted from the field of wheat. If any one, therefore, has been fired by the desire for vengeance against another, so that he has given him up to prison or bound him with chains, let him make haste to forgive not only the innocent, but also one who seems worthy of punishment, that he may with confidence make use of the clause in the Lord's prayer and say, Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. Which petition the Lord marks with peculiar emphasis, as if the efficacy of the whole rested on this condition, by saying, For if you forgive men their sins, your Father which is in heaven also will forgive you: but if you forgive not men, neither will your Father forgive you your sins.

#### **VI. The right use of Lent will lead to a happy participation in Easter**

Accordingly, dearly-beloved, being mindful of our weakness, because we easily fall into all kinds of faults, let us by no means neglect this special remedy and most effectual healing of our wounds. Let us remit, that we may have remission: let us grant the pardon which we crave: let us not be eager to be revenged when we pray to be forgiven. Let us not pass over the groans of the poor with deaf ear, but with prompt kindness bestow our mercy on the needy, that we may deserve to find mercy in the judgment. And he that, aided by God's grace, shall strain every nerve after this perfection, will keep this holy fast faithfully; free from the leaven of the old wickedness, in the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth 1 Corinthians 5:8, he will reach the blessed Passover, and by newness of life will worthily rejoice in

the mystery of man's reformation through Christ our Lord Who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

## **Sermon 40**

### **On Lent, II.**

#### **1. Progress and improvement always possible**

Although, dearly-beloved, as the Easter festival approaches, the very recurrence of the season points out to us the Lenten fast, yet our words also must add their exhortations which, the Lord helping us, may be not useless to the active nor irksome to the devout. For since the idea of these days demands the increase of all our religious performances, there is no one, I am sure, that does not feel glad at being incited to good works. For though our nature which, so long as we are mortal, will be changeable, is advancing to the highest pursuits of virtue, yet always has the possibility of falling back, so has it always the possibility of advancing. And this is the true justness of the perfect that they should never assume themselves to be perfect, lest flagging in the purpose of their yet unfinished journey, they should fall into the danger of failure, through giving up the desire for progress.

And, therefore, because none of us, dearly beloved, is so perfect and holy as not to be able to be more perfect and more holy, let us all together, without difference of rank, without distinction of desert, with pious eagerness pursue our race from what we have attained to what we yet aspire to, and make some needful additions to our regular devotions. For he that is not more attentive than usual to religion in these days, is shown at other times to be not attentive enough.

#### **2. Satan seeks to supply his numerous losses by fresh gains**

Hence the reading of the Apostle's proclamation has sounded opportunely in our ears, saying, Behold now is the accepted time, behold now is the day of salvation. For what is more accepted than this time, what more suitable to salvation than these days, in which war is proclaimed against vices and progress is made in all virtues? You had indeed always to keep watch, O Christian soul, against the enemy of your salvation, lest any spot should be exposed to the tempter's snares: but now greater wariness and keener prudence must be employed by you when that same foe of yours rages with fiercer hatred. For now in all the world the power of his ancient sway is taken from him, and the countless vessels of captivity are rescued from his grasp. The people of all nations and of all tongues are breaking away from their cruel plunderer, and now no race of men is found that does not struggle against the tyrant's laws, while through all the borders of the earth many thousands of thousands are being prepared to be reborn in Christ : and as the birth of a new creature draws near, spiritual wickedness is being driven out by those who were possessed by it. The blasphemous fury of the despoiled foe frets, therefore, and seeks new

gains because it has lost its ancient right. Unwearied and ever wakeful, he snatches at any sheep he finds straying carelessly from the sacred folds, intent on leading them over the steeps of treasure and down the slopes of luxury into the abodes of death. And so he inflames their wrath, feeds their hatreds, whets their desires, mocks at their continence, arouses their gluttony.

### **3. The twofold nature of Christ shown at the Temptation**

For whom would he not dare to try, who did not keep from his treacherous attempts even on our Lord Jesus Christ? For, as the story of the Gospel has disclosed, when our Saviour, Who was true God, that He might show Himself true Man also, and banish all wicked and erroneous opinions, after the fast of 40 days and nights, had experienced the hunger of human weakness, the devil, rejoicing at having found in Him a sign of possible and mortal nature, in order to test the power which he feared, said, If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread Matthew 4:3. Doubtless the Almighty could do this, and it was easy that at the Creator's command a creature of any kind should change into the form that it was commanded: just as when He willed it, in the marriage feast, He changed the water into wine: but here it better agreed with His purposes of salvation that His haughty foe's cunning should be vanquished by the Lord, not in the power of His Godhead, but by the mystery of His humiliation. At length, when the devil had been put to flight and the tempter baffled in all his arts, angels came to the Lord and ministered to Him, that He being true Man and true God, His Manhood might be unsullied by those crafty questions, and His Godhead displayed by those holy ministrations. And so let the sons and disciples of the devil be confounded, who, being filled with the poison of vipers, deceive the simple, denying in Christ the presence of both true natures, while they rob either His Godhead of Manhood, or His Manhood of Godhead, although both falsehoods are destroyed by a twofold and simultaneous proof: for by His bodily hunger His perfect Manhood was shown, and by the attendant angels His perfect Godhead.

### **4. The Fast should not end with abstinence from food, but lead to good deeds**

Therefore, dearly-beloved, seeing that, as we are taught by our Redeemer's precept, man lives not in bread alone, but in every word of God, and it is right that Christian people, whatever the amount of their abstinence, should rather desire to satisfy themselves with the Word of God than with bodily food, let us with ready devotion and eager faith enter upon the celebration of the solemn fast, not with barren abstinence from food, which is often imposed on us by weakness of body, or the disease of avarice, but in bountiful benevolence: that in truth we may be of those of whom the very Truth speaks, blessed are they which hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled Matthew 5:6. Let works of piety, therefore, be our delight, and let us be filled with those kinds of food which feed us for eternity. Let us rejoice in the replenishment of the poor, whom our bounty has satisfied. Let us delight in the clothing of those whose nakedness we have covered with needful raiment. Let our humaneness be felt by the sick in their illnesses, by the weakly in their infirmities, by the exiles in their hardships, by the orphans in their destitution, and by solitary widows in their sadness: in the helping of whom there is no one that cannot carry out some amount of benevolence. For no one's income is small, whose heart is

big: and the measure of one's mercy and goodness does not depend on the size of one's means. Wealth of goodwill is never rightly lacking, even in a slender purse. Doubtless the expenditure of the rich is greater, and that of the poor smaller, but there is no difference in the fruit of their works, where the purpose of the workers is the same.

#### **5. And still further it should lead to personal amendment and domestic harmony**

But, beloved, in this opportunity for the virtues' exercise there are also other notable crowns, to be won by no dispersing abroad of granaries, by no disbursement of money, if wantonness is repelled, if drunkenness is abandoned, and the lusts of the flesh tamed by the laws of chastity: if hatreds pass into affection, if enmities be turned into peace, if meekness extinguishes wrath, if gentleness forgives wrongs, if in fine the conduct of master and of slaves is so well ordered that the rule of the one is milder, and the discipline of the other is more complete. It is by such observances then, dearly-beloved, that God's mercy will be gained, the charge of sin wiped out, and the adorable Easter festival devoutly kept. And this the pious Emperors of the Roman world have long guarded with holy observance; for in honour of the Lord's Passion and Resurrection they bend their lofty power, and relaxing the severity of their decrees set free many of their prisoners: so that on the days when the world is saved by the Divine mercy, their clemency, which is modelled on the Heavenly goodness, may be zealously followed by us. Let Christian peoples then imitate their princes, and be incited to forbearance in their homes by these royal examples. For it is not right that private laws should be severer than public. Let faults be forgiven, let bonds be loosed, offenses wiped out, designs of vengeance fall through, that the holy festival through the Divine and human grace may find all happy, all innocent: through our Lord Jesus Christ Who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns God for endless ages of ages. Amen.

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His many triumphs, the unconquered Master of the Christian warfare. He has girt our loins with the belt of chastity, He has shod our feet with the bonds of peace: because the unbelted soldier is quickly vanquished by the suggester of immodesty, and he that is unshod is easily bitten by the serpent. He has given the shield of faith for the protection of our whole body; on our head has He set the helmet of salvation; our right hand has He furnished with a sword, that is with the word of Truth: that the spiritual warrior may not only be safe from wounds, but also may have strength to wound his assailant.

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## Sermon 42

### On Lent, IV.

#### **I. The Lenten fast an opportunity for restoring our purity.**

In proposing to preach this most holy and important fast to you, dearly beloved, how shall I begin more fitly than by quoting the words of the Apostle, in whom Christ Himself was speaking, and by reminding you of what we have read : behold, now is the acceptable time, behold now is the day of salvation. For though there are no seasons which are not full of Divine blessings, and though access is ever open to us to God's mercy through His grace, yet now all men's minds should be moved with greater zeal to spiritual progress, and animated by larger confidence, when the return of the day, on which we were redeemed, invites us to all the duties of godliness: that we may keep the super-excellent mystery of the Lord's passion with bodies and hearts purified. These great mysteries do indeed require from us such unflagging devotion and unwearied reverence that we should remain in God's sight always the same, as we ought to be found on the Easter feast itself. But because few have this constancy, and, because so long as the stricter observance is relaxed in consideration of the frailty of the flesh, and so long as one's interests extend over all the various actions of this life, even pious hearts must get some soils from the dust of the world, the Divine Providence has with great beneficence taken care that the discipline of the forty days should heal us and restore the purity of our minds, during which the faults of other times might be redeemed by pious acts and removed by chaste fasting.

#### **II. Lent must be used for removing all our defilements, and of good works there must be no stint**

As we are therefore, dearly-beloved, about to enter on those mystic days which are dedicated to the benefits of fasting, let us take care to obey the Apostle's precepts, cleansing ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit 2 Corinthians 7:1: that by controlling the struggles that go on between our two natures, the spirit which, if it is under the guidance of God, should be the governor of the body, may uphold the dignity of its rule: so that we may give no offense to any, nor be subject to the chidings of reprovers. For we shall be rightly attacked with rebukes, and through our fault ungodly tongues will arm themselves to do harm to religion, if the conduct of those that fast is at variance with the standard of perfect purity. For our fast does not consist chiefly of mere abstinence from food, nor are dainties withdrawn from our bodily appetites with profit, unless the mind is recalled from wrong-doing and the tongue restrained from slandering. This is a time of gentleness and long-suffering, of peace and tranquillity: when all the pollutions of vice are to be eradicated and continuance of virtue is to be attained by us. Now let godly minds boldly accustom themselves to forgive faults, to pass over insults, and to forget wrongs. Now let the faithful spirit train himself with the armour of righteousness on the

right hand and on the left, that through honour and dishonour, through ill repute and good repute, the conscience may be undisturbed in unwavering uprightness, not puffed up by praise and not wearied out by revilings. The self-restraint of the religious should not be gloomy, but sincere; no murmurs of complaint should be heard from those who are never without the consolation of holy joys. The decrease of worldly means should not be feared in the practice of works of mercy. Christian poverty is always rich, because what it has is more than what it has not. Nor does the poor man fear to labour in this world, to whom it is given to possess all things in the Lord of all things. Therefore those who do the things which are good must have no manner of fear lest the power of doing should fail them; since in the gospel the widow's devotion is extolled in the case of her two mites, and voluntary bounty gets its reward for a cup of cold water. For the measure of our charitableness is fixed by the sincerity of our feelings, and he that shows mercy on others will never want for mercy himself. The holy widow of Sarepta discovered this, who offered the blessed Elias in the time of famine one day's food, which was all she had, and putting the prophet's hunger before her own needs, ungrudgingly gave up a handful of grain and a little oil. But she did not lose what she gave in all faith, and in the vessels emptied by her godly bounty a source of new plenty arose, that the fullness of her substance might not be diminished by the holy purpose to which she had put it, because she had never dreaded being brought to want.

### **III. As with the Saviour, so with us, the devil tries to make our very piety its own snare**

But, dearly-beloved, doubt not that the devil, who is the opponent of all virtues, is jealous of these good desires, to which we are confident you are prompted of your own selves, and that to this end he is arming the force of his malice in order to make your very piety its own snare, and endeavouring to overcome by boastfulness those whom he could not defeat by distrustfulness. For the vice of pride is a near neighbour to good deeds, and arrogance ever lies in wait hard by virtue: because it is hard for him that lives praise-worthily not to be caught by man's praise unless, as it is written, he that glories, glories in the Lord 1 Corinthians 10:17 . Whose intentions would that most naughty enemy not dare to attack? Whose fasting would he not seek to break down? Seeing that, as has been shown in the reading of the Gospel , he did not restrain his wiles even against the Saviour of the world Himself. For being exceedingly afraid of His fast, which lasted 40 days and nights, he wished most cunningly to discover whether this power of abstinence was given Him or His very own: for he need not fear the defeat of all his treacherous designs, if Christ were throughout subject to the same conditions as He is in body. And so he first craftily examined whether He were Himself the Creator of all things, such that He could change the natures of material things as He pleased: secondly, whether under the form of human flesh the Godhead lay concealed, to Whom it was easy to make the air His chariot, and convey His earthly limbs through space. But when the Lord preferred to resist him by the uprightness of His true Manhood, than to display the power of His Godhead, to this he turns the craftiness of his third design, that he might tempt by the lust of empire Him in Whom the signs of Divine power had failed, and entice Him to the worship of himself by promising the kingdoms of the world. But the devil's cleverness was rendered foolish by God's wisdom, so that the proud foe was bound by that which he had formerly bound, and did not fear to assail Him Whom it behooved to be slain for the world.

#### **IV. The perverse turn even their fasting into sin**

This adversary's wiles then let us beware of, not only in the enticements of the palate, but also in our purpose of abstinence. For he who knew how to bring death upon mankind by means of food, knows also how to harm us through our very fasting, and using the Manichæans as his tools, as he once drove men to take what was forbidden, so in the opposite direction he prompts them to avoid what is allowed. It is indeed a helpful observance, which accustoms one to scanty diet, and checks the appetite for dainties: but woe to the dogmatizing of those whose very fasting is turned to sin. For they condemn the creature's nature to the Creator's injury, and maintain that they are defiled by eating those things of which they contend the devil, not God, is the author: although absolutely nothing that exists is evil, nor is anything in nature included in the actually bad. For the good Creator made all things good and the Maker of the universe is one, Who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is in them. Of which whatever is granted to man for food and drink, is holy and clean after its kind. But if it is taken with immoderate greed, it is the excess that disgraces the eaters and drinkers, not the nature of the food or drink that defiles them. For all things, as the Apostle says, are clean to the clean. But to the defiled and unbelieving nothing is clean, but their mind and conscience is defiled Titus 1:15.

#### **V. Be reasonable and seasonable in your fasting**

But you, dearly-beloved, the holy offspring of the catholic Mother, who have been taught in the school of Truth by God's Spirit, moderate your liberty with due reasonableness, knowing that it is good to abstain even from things lawful, and at seasons of greater strictness to distinguish one food from another with a view to giving up the use of some kinds, not to condemning their nature. And so be not infected with the error of those who are corrupted merely by their own ordinances, serving the creature rather than the Creator Romans 9:26, and offering a foolish abstinence to the service of the lights of heaven: seeing that they have chosen to fast on the first and second days of the week in honour of the sun and moon, proving themselves in this one instance of their perverseness twice disloyal to God, twice blasphemous, by setting up their fast not only in worship of the stars but also in contempt of the Lord's Resurrection. For they reject the mystery of man's salvation and refuse to believe that Christ our Lord in the true flesh of our nature was truly born, truly suffered, was truly buried and was truly raised. And in consequence, condemn the day of our rejoicing by the gloom of their fasting. And since to conceal their infidelity they dare to be present at our meetings, at the Communion of the Mysteries they bring themselves sometimes, in order to ensure their concealment, to receive Christ's Body with unworthy lips, though they altogether refuse to drink the Blood of our Redemption. And this we make known to you, holy brethren, that men of this sort may be detected by you by these signs, and that they whose impious pretences have been discovered may be driven from the society of the saints by priestly authority. For of such the blessed Apostle Paul in his foresight warns God's Church, saying: but we beseech you, brethren, that you observe those who make discussions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned and turn away from them. For such persons serve not Christ the Lord but their own belly, and by sweet words and fair speeches beguile the hearts of the innocent Romans 16:17-18 .

## **VI. Make your fasting a reality by amendment in your lives**

Being therefore, dearly-beloved, fully instructed by these admonitions of ours, which we have often repeated in your ears in protest against abominable error, enter upon the holy days of Lent with Godly devoutness, and prepare yourselves to win God's mercy by your own works of mercy. Quench your anger, wipe out enmities, cherish unity, and vie with one another in the offices of true humility. Rule your slaves and those who are put under you with fairness, let none of them be tortured by imprisonment or chains. Foresake vengeance and forgive offenses. Exchange severity for gentleness, indignation for meekness, discord for peace. Let all men find us self-restrained, peaceful, and kind, that our fastings may be acceptable to God. For in a word to Him we offer the sacrifice of true abstinence and true Godliness, when we keep ourselves from all evil: the Almighty God helping us through all, to Whom with the Son and Holy Spirit belongs one Godhead and one Majesty, for ever and ever. Amen.

## **Sermon 46**

### **On Lent, VIII.**

#### **I. Lent must be kept not only by avoiding bodily impurity but also by avoiding errors of thought and faith**

We know indeed, dearly-beloved, your devotion to be so warm that in the fasting, which is the forerunner of the Lord's Easter, many of you will have forestalled our exhortations. But because the right practice of abstinence is needful not only to the mortification of the flesh but also to the purification of the mind, we desire your observance to be so complete that, as you cut down the pleasures that belong to the lusts of the flesh, so you should banish the errors that proceed from the imaginations of the heart. For he whose heart is polluted with no misbelief prepares himself with true and reasonable purification for the Paschal Feast, in which all the mysteries of our religion meet together. For, as the Apostle says, that all that is not of faith is sin Romans 14:23, the fasting of those will be unprofitable and vain, whom the father of lying deceives with his delusions, and who are not fed by Christ's true flesh. As then we must with the whole heart obey the Divine commands and sound doctrine, so we must use all foresight in abstaining from wicked imaginations. For the mind then only keeps holy and spiritual fast when it rejects the food of error and the poison of falsehood, which our crafty and wily foe plies us with more treacherously now, when by the very return of the venerable Festival, the whole church generally is admonished to understand the mysteries of its salvation. For he is the true confessor and worshipper of Christ's resurrection, who is not confused about His passion, nor deceived about His bodily nativity. For some are so ashamed of the Gospel of the Cross of Christ, as to

impudently nullify the punishment which He underwent for the world's redemption, and have denied the very nature of true flesh in the Lord, not understanding how the impassible and unchangeable Deity of God's Word could have so far condescended for man's salvation, as by His power not to lose His own properties, and in His mercy to take on Him ours. And so in Christ, there is a twofold form but one person, and the Son of God, who is at the same time Son of Man, is one Lord, accepting the condition of a slave by the design of loving-kindness, not by the law of necessity, because by His power He became humble, by His power passible, by His power mortal; that for the destruction of the tyranny of sin and death, the weak nature in Him might be capable of punishment, and the strong nature not lose anything of its glory.

## **II. All the actions of Christ reveal the presence of the twofold nature**

And so, dearly-beloved, when in reading or hearing the Gospel you find certain things in our Lord Jesus Christ subjected to injuries and certain things illumined by miracles, in such a way that in the same Person now the Humanity appears, and now the Divinity shines out, do not put down any of these things to a delusion, as if in Christ there is either Manhood alone or Godhead alone, but believe both faithfully, worship both right humbly; so that in the union of the Word and the Flesh there may be no separation, and the bodily proofs may not seem delusive, because the divine signs were evident in Jesus. The attestations to both natures in Him are true and abundant, and by the depth of the Divine purpose all concur to this end, that the inviolable Word not being separated from the passible flesh, the Godhead may be understood as in all things partaker with the flesh and flesh with the Godhead. And, therefore, must the Christian mind that would eschew lies and be the disciple of truth, use the Gospel-story confidently, and, as if still in company with the Apostles themselves, distinguish what is visibly done by the Lord, now by the spiritual understanding and now by the bodily organs of sight. Assign to the man that He is born a boy of a woman: assign to God that His mother's virginity is not harmed, either by conception or by bearing. Recognize the form of a slave enwrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger, but acknowledge that it was the Lord's form that was announced by angels, proclaimed by the elements, adored by the wise men. Understand it of His humanity that he did not avoid the marriage feast: confess it Divine that he turned water into wine. Let your own feelings explain to you why He shed tears over a dead friend: let His Divine power be realized, when that same friend, after mouldering in the grave four days, is brought to life and raised only by the command of His voice. To make clay with spittle and earth was a work of the body: but to anoint therewith and enlighten the eyes of the blind is an undoubted mark of that power which had reserved for the revelation of its glory that which it had not allowed to the early part of His natural life. It is truly human to relieve bodily fatigue with rest in sleep: but it is truly Divine to quell the violence of raging storms by a rebuking command. To set food before the hungry denotes human kindness and a philanthropic spirit: but with five loaves and two fishes to satisfy 5,000 men, besides women and children, who would dare deny that to be the work of Deity? A Deity which, by the co-operation of the functions of true flesh, showed not only itself in Manhood, but also Manhood in itself; for the old, original wounds in man's nature could not be healed, except by the Word of God taking to Himself flesh from the Virgin's womb, whereby in one and the

same Person flesh and the Word co-existed.

### **III. Hold fast to the statements of the Creed**

This belief in the Lord's Incarnation, dearly-beloved, through which the whole Church is Christ's body , hold firm with heart unshaken and abstain from all the lies of heretics, and remember that your works of mercy will only then profit you, and your strict continence only then bear fruit, when your minds are unsoiled by any defilement from wrong opinions. Cast away the arguments of this world's wisdom, for God hates them, and none can arrive by them at the knowledge of the Truth, and keep fixed in your mind that which you say in the Creed. Believe the Son of God to be co-eternal with the Father by Whom all things were made and without Whom nothing was made, born also according to the flesh at the end of the times. Believe Him to have been in the body crucified, dead, raised up, and lifted above the heights of heavenly powers, set on the Father's right hand, about to come in the same flesh in which He ascended, to judge the living and the dead. For this is what the Apostle proclaims to all the faithful, saying: if you be risen with Christ seek the things which are above, where Christ is sitting on the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth. For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. For when Christ, our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory Colossians 3:1-4.

### **IV. Use Lent for general improvement in the whole round of Christian duties**

Relying, therefore, dearly-beloved, on so great a promise, be heavenly not only in hope, but also in conduct. And though our minds must at all times be set on holiness of mind and body, yet now during these 40 days of fasting bestir yourselves to yet more active works of piety, not only in the distribution of alms, which are very effectual in attesting reform, but also in forgiving offenses, and in being merciful to those accused of wrongdoing, that the condition which God has laid down between Himself and us may not be against us when we pray. For when we say, in accordance with the Lord's teaching, Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors Matthew 6:12, we ought with the whole heart to carry out what we say. For then only will what we ask in the next clause come to pass, that we be not led into temptation and freed from all evils : through our Lord Jesus Christ, Who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

## **Sermon 49**

### **On Lent, XI.**

#### **I. The Lenten fast is incumbent on all alike**

On all days and seasons, indeed, dearly-beloved, some marks of the Divine goodness are set, and no part of the year is destitute of sacred mysteries, in order that, so long as proofs of our salvation meet us on all sides, we may the more eagerly accept the never-ceasing calls of God's mercy. But all that is bestowed on the restoration of human souls in the various works and gifts of grace is put before us more clearly and abundantly now, when no isolated portions of the Faith are to be celebrated, but the whole together. For as the Easter festival approaches, the greatest and most binding of fasts is kept, and its observance is imposed on all the faithful without exception; because no one is so holy that he ought not to be holier, nor so devout that he might not be devouter. For who, that is set in the uncertainty of this life, can be found either exempt from temptation, or free from fault? Who is there who would not wish for additions to his virtue, or removal of his vice? Seeing that adversity does us harm, and prosperity spoils us, and it is equally dangerous not to have what we want at all, and to have it in the fullest measure. There is a trap in the fullness of riches, a trap in the straits of poverty. The one lifts us up in pride, the other incites us to complaint. Health tries us, sickness tries us, so long as the one fosters carelessness and the other sadness. There is a snare in security, a snare in fear; and it matters not whether the mind which is given over to earthly thoughts, is taken up with pleasures or with cares; for it is equally unhealthy to languish under empty delights, or to labour under racking anxiety.

## **II. The broad road is crowded, the narrow way of salvation nearly empty**

And thus is perfectly fulfilled that assurance of the Truth, by which we learn that narrow and steep is the way that leads to life Matthew 7:14; and while the breadth of the way that leads to death is crowded with a large company, the steps are few of those that tread the path of safety. And wherefore is the left road more thronged than the right, save that the multitude is prone to worldly joys and carnal goods? And although that which it desires is short-lived and uncertain, yet men endure toil more willingly for the lust of pleasure than for love of virtue. Thus while those who crave things visible are unnumbered, those who prefer the eternal to the temporal are hardly to be found. And, therefore, seeing that the blessed Apostle Paul says, the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal 2 Corinthians 4:18, the path of virtue lies hid and in concealment, to a certain extent, since by hope we were saved Romans 8:24, and true faith loves that above all things, which it attains to without any intervention of the flesh. A great work and toil it is then to keep our wayward heart from all sin, and, with the numberless allurements of pleasure to ensnare it on all sides, not to let the vigour of the mind give way to any attack. Who touches pitch, and is not defiled thereby Sirach 13:1? who is not weakened by the flesh? Who is not begrimed by the dust? Who, lastly, is of such purity as not to be polluted by those things without which one cannot live? For the Divine teaching commands by the Apostle's mouth that they who have wives should be as though they had none: and those that weep as though they wept not; and those that rejoice as though they rejoiced not; and those that buy as though they possessed not; and those that use this world as though they used it not; for the fashion of this world passes away. Blessed, therefore, is the mind that passes the time of its pilgrimage in chaste sobriety, and loiters not in the things through which it has to walk, so that, as a stranger rather than the possessor of its earthly abode, it may not be wanting in human affections, and yet rest on the Divine promises.



### **III. Satan is incited to fresh efforts at this season of the year**

And, dearly-beloved, no season requires and bestows this fortitude more than the present, when by the observance of a special strictness a habit is acquired which must be persevered in. For it is well known to you that this is the time when throughout the world the devil waxes furious, and the Christian army has to combat him, and any that have grown lukewarm and slothful, or that are absorbed in worldly cares, must now be furnished with spiritual armour and their ardour kindled for the fray by the heavenly trumpet, inasmuch as he, through whose envy death came into the world Wisdom 2:24, is now consumed with the strongest jealousy and now tortured with the greatest vexation. For he sees whole tribes of the human race brought in afresh to the adoption of God's sons and the offspring of the New Birth multiplied through the virgin fertility of the Church. He sees himself robbed of all his tyrannic power, and driven from the hearts of those he once possessed, while from either sex thousands of the old, the young, the middle-aged are snatched away from him, and no one is debarred by sin either of his own or original, where justification is not paid for deserts, but simply given as a free gift. He sees, too, those that have lapsed, and have been deceived by his treacherous snares, washed in the tears of penitence and, by the Apostle's key unlocking the gates of mercy, admitted to the benefit of reconciliation. He feels, moreover, that the day of the Lord's Passion is at hand, and that he is crushed by the power of that cross which in Christ, Who was free from all debt of sin, was the world's ransom and not the penalty of sin.

### **IV. Self-examination by the standard of God's commands the right occupation in Lent**

And so, that the malice of the fretting foe may effect nothing by its rage, a keener devotion must be awaked to the performance of the Divine commands, in order that we may enter on the season, when all the mysteries of the Divine mercy meet together, with preparedness both of mind and body, invoking the guidance and help of God, that we may be strong to fulfil all things through Him, without Whom we can do nothing. For the injunction is laid on us, in order that we may seek the aid of Him Who lays it. Nor must any one excuse himself by reason of his weakness, since He Who has granted the will, also gives the power, as the blessed Apostle James says, If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, Who gives to all liberally and upbraids not, and it shall be given him James 1:5 . Which of the faithful does not know what virtues he ought to cultivate, and what vices to fight against? Who is so partial or so unskilled a judge of his own conscience as not to know what ought to be removed, and what ought to be developed? Surely no one is so devoid of reason as not to understand the character of his mode of life, or not to know the secrets of his heart. Let him not then please himself in everything, nor judge himself according to the delights of the flesh, but place his every habit in the scale of the Divine commands, where, some things being ordered to be done and others forbidden, he can examine himself in a true balance by weighing the actions of his life according to this standard. For the designing mercy of God has set up the brightest mirror in His commandments, wherein a man may see his mind's face and realize its conformity or dissimilarity to God's image: with the specific purpose that, at least, during the days of our Redemption and Restoration, we may throw off awhile our carnal cares and restless occupations, and betake ourselves from earthly matters to heavenly.

## **V. Forgiveness of our own sins requires that we should forgive others**

But because, as it is written, in many things we all stumble James 3:2, let the feeling of mercy be first aroused and the faults of others against us be forgotten; that we may not violate by any love of revenge that most holy compact, to which we bind ourselves in the Lord's prayer, and when we say forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors, let us not be hard in forgiving, because we must be possessed either with the desire for revenge, or with the leniency of gentleness, and for man, who is ever exposed to the dangers of temptations, it is more to be desired that his own faults should not need punishment than that he should get the faults of others punished. And what is more suitable to the Christian faith than that not only in the Church, but also in all men's homes, there should be forgiveness of sins? Let threats be laid aside; let bonds be loosed, for he who will not loose them will bind himself with them much more disastrously. For whatsoever one man resolves upon against another, he decrees against himself by his own terms. Whereas blessed are the merciful, for God shall have mercy on them : and He is just and kind in His judgments, allowing some to be in the power of others to this end, that under fair government may be preserved both the profitableness of discipline and the kindness of clemency, and that no one should dare to refuse that pardon to another's shortcomings, which he wishes to receive for his own.

## **VI. Reconciliation between enemies and almsgiving are also Lenten duties**

Furthermore, as the Lord says, that the peacemakers are blessed, because they shall be called sons of God Matthew 5:9, let all discords and enmities be laid aside, and let no one think to have a share in the Paschal feast that has neglected to restore brotherly peace. For with the Father on high, he that is not in charity with the brethren, will not be reckoned in the number of His sons. Furthermore, in the distribution of alms and care of the poor, let our Christian fast-times be fat and abound; and let each bestow on the weak and destitute those dainties which he denies himself. Let pains be taken that all may bless God with one mouth, and let him that gives some portion of substance understand that he is a minister of the Divine mercy; for God has placed the cause of the poor in the hand of the liberal man; that the sins which are washed away either by the waters of baptism, or the tears of repentance, may be also blotted out by almsgiving; for the Scripture says, As water extinguishes fire, so alms extinguishes sin Sirach 3:30 . Through our Lord Jesus Christ, etc.