

THE SERMONS OF
ST. FRANCIS DE SALES
FOR
LENT



St. Francis de Sales
1567-1622
Bishop, Founder of the Visitation,
and Doctor of the Church

THE SERMONS OF
ST. FRANCIS DE SALES
FOR
LENT
GIVEN IN THE YEAR 1622

Volume III in the Series

Translated by Nuns of the Visitation

Edited by Father Lewis S. Fiorelli, O.S.F.S.

“One entire good consists not only in accepting the truth of God’s word, but in persevering in it.”

—St. Francis de Sales

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My advice is that henceforth
we live no more in ourselves, but that
in heart, intention, and confidence
we lodge forever
in the pierced side of the Saviour.
—*St. Francis de Sales*

The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales

Volume I	On Prayer
Volume II	On Our Lady
Volume III	For Lent

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About St. Francis de Sales.....	xiii
Preface.....	xvii
Translator's Note.....	xxiii

1. Fasting

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, February 9, 1622, concerning the spiritual fruits of fasting and the conditions which make fasting pleasing to God: fasting universally, that is, with all the senses and with the understanding, memory, and the appetites of the will; how completely the primitive Christians fasted; fasting through humility rather than through vanity, fasting through obedience rather than through self-will, following the community customs in fasting rather than seeking to be singular, fasting only to please God and not for the esteem of men, and the evil of subjecting the commands of God and our superiors to our own human discretion..... 1

2. Temptation

Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent, February 13, 1622, concerning the universality of temptation, the spiritual danger of idleness, faith as a prime weapon against temptation, slothful souls, presumptuous reliance of beginners on the strength from their sensible fervor, attachment to the consolations of God, Our Lord's example in undergoing temptation from the devil, battling one's faults with patience and perseverance, vain hopes which distract the soul from practicing solid virtue, the folly of avariciously chasing after a multiplicity of devotions, and vain complacency in God's consolations..... 15

3. Faith

Sermon for Thursday after the First Sunday of Lent, February 17, 1622, concerning faith as the adhesion of the understanding to the truths revealed by God or the Church, living faith which produces the fruit of good works vs. dead or dying faith, vigilant, penetrating faith vs. dormant faith, the supernatural prudence which accompanies vigilant faith, attentive faith, confidence in prayer, perseverance in prayer, patience in prayer, and humility in prayer..... 34

4. Eternal Happiness

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent, February 20, 1622, concerning our inability to comprehend eternal happiness, the ability of the soul in Heaven to use its faculties to understand clearly and to love ardently, the soul's joy in heavenly conversations with the angels, saints, Our Lady, Our Lord, and with the Most Holy Trinity, the soul's great joy in recalling Our Lord's mercies to it, His Passion and death, and in seeing the love of His Heart for it, each soul's great delight in receiving a secret name known to God alone, the kiss given by God to the blessed soul, and the endlessness of the joys of eternity..... 52

5. Election and Reprobation

Sermon for the Thursday after the Second Sunday of Lent (coinciding with the Feast of St. Matthias), February 24, 1622, concerning the danger which all Christians live in of refusing to receive the grace of salvation, the danger of even specially favored souls falling from God and being damned, why we must always have a great fear of damnation—even in the religious life, the avarice of the evil rich man, two kinds of avarice and especially that of clinging to what we possess, using God for one's own benefit, non-material avarice, using riches vs. idolizing riches, the avarice and treachery of Judas, the beginnings of spiritual downfall, the salutary fear of sin, availing ourselves of the grace to mortify our evil inclinations, the replacement of those who die or defect from the

Apostolic College or from the religious life, and the choice of St. Matthias to replace Judas..... 66

6. Mutual Charity

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent, February 27, 1622, concerning Our Lord's commandment of love of neighbor, His desire that we be united with each other, the relationship between love of God and love of neighbor, in what way the Commandment of love of neighbor is new, Our Lord's example of love of neighbor, Our Lord's restoration of man to God's image and likeness, seeing and loving Our Lord in our neighbor, the extent to which we should love our neighbor, how it is better to be spent for our neighbor's sake than to spend ourselves for him in the way we choose, union with God and our neighbor in the Most Blessed Sacrament, love of neighbor as the Commandment which God stresses to us the most earnestly, and how we should love our neighbor with the same incomparable ardor and constancy with which Our Lord loved us on the Cross..... 83

7. Proper Conduct in Illness

Sermon for the Thursday after the Third Sunday of Lent, March 3, 1622, concerning the cure of St. Peter's mother-in-law, the celibacy of St. Peter, the Communion of Saints, God's lordship over all things, two methods of meditating, the wonderful submission to God and resignation into the hands of her superiors of St. Peter's mother-in-law as she lay ill with fever, over-eagerness in seeking cures from God, St. Bernard's words that religious must not be concerned with their bodily illnesses, over-eagerness in seeking remedies for illness, the admirable submission to God's will of St. Peter's mother-in-law and how we should imitate her, using one's health to serve God, and the practice of true evangelical poverty in time of illness..... 99

8. God's Spiritual Providence

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 6, 1622, concerning God's special spiritual care of those who

have withdrawn from the world to follow the Saviour on the “mountain” of perfection, how God’s Providence is greater in proportion to the soul’s lack of anxiety for its own needs, how we must diligently use the ordinary means to attain perfection and how, if these fail, God would sooner work a miracle than leave us without assistance, how God tests souls, anxiety to be rid of spiritual pains rather than trusting God to console us as He wills, the twin virtues of humility and generosity, how Our lord reproduced the five loaves and two fishes, how religious souls must be satisfied when God gives them only a sufficiency (or even less), and how God will continually renew the spiritual goods which we have..... 116

9. Proper Fear of Death

Sermon for the Thursday after the Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 10, 1622, concerning Our Lord’s raising of the son of the widow of Naim, Our Lord’s motives for performing this miracle—and in this manner, burial in the Old and in the New Law, God’s creative power in raising the dead, the error of some ancient philosophers who say we should not fear death, the holy Fathers’ teaching that we must fear death without fearing it, how even saintly souls should fear death, St. Paul’s desire for death and Job’s desire for death, the secret language of love, that it is good to fear death, how this fear should be combined with confidence in God’s Providence, how in order to die well we must lead a good life, how we should daily remind ourselves that we shall die, and how we should always bear in mind the account we must someday render to God, and keep ourselves in the state we would wish to be found in at death..... 129

10. Hearing the Word of God

Sermon for Passion Sunday, March 13, 1622, concerning the goodness which should be practiced by those who preach God’s word, how we should esteem God’s word even if it is taught by a sinful person, how a person’s refusal to believe Our Lord’s word proves the evilness

of that person—not of Our Lord, how all sin is a result of defection from truth, how God’s word is Truth, how Lucifer’s sin as well as that of our first parents resulted from a choice of vanity over truth, how we should remain attentive to the truths of faith, our culpable failure to live according to the truths of God’s word, the dispositions with which we should hear God’s word and the unimportance of distractions and dryness in the lower part of our soul as long as the higher part of the soul is devoted and reverent toward God’s word..... 147

11. Humility and Obedience

Sermon for Palm Sunday, March 20, 1622, concerning the perfection and imperfection found in every creature (except the Blessed Virgin)—including the angels in Heaven and the lives of the saints, how we should take note of and profit from the imperfections in the lives of the saints, how we should not use the faults of the saints to excuse our own failings, worldly prudence vs. the folly of the Cross, fraternal correction, the ass and colt upon which Our Lord entered Jerusalem and what they represent, Our Lord’s humility and patience and submission, perfect obedience vs. obedience full of worldly prudence, the proper answer to make to the objections of worldly prudence, Our Lord’s confounding of the maxims of the world, and our blessedness in imitating Him..... 160

12. The Passion of Our Lord and What It Means

Sermon for Good Friday, March 25, 1622, concerning the brass serpent which saved the Israelites, the sinlessness of Christ, the manner in which He redeemed us, the two natures of Christ and our three “natures,” Our Lord as Saviour, how our salvation comes from looking upon our Saviour, Our Lord’s seven last words, His prayer for forgiveness for those crucifying Him, His pardon of the good thief and of St. Peter, and the bad thief’s and Judas’ damnation; the danger of damnation and how we should both fear and hope, Our Lord’s confiding of Our Lady and St. John to each other, the

darkness on Good Friday, Our Lord's great sorrow over those who would not profit from His Passion, His feeling of abandonment by His Father, His thirst, His obedience in remaining on the Cross and how we should imitate Him, the Cross as the one way of salvation, and Our Lord's perfect commending of Himself into His Father's hands and how we should do likewise, making no reservations..... 177

Index.....209

ABOUT ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

St. Francis de Sales, the holy bishop, founder, and Doctor of the Church, is known throughout the Church for his great sanctity, learning, theological knowledge, gentleness, and understanding of the human soul. Through these marvelous gifts he converted and guided innumerable souls to God during his own lifetime, and re-converted 70,000 from Calvinism. He continues to direct many souls through his spiritual writings and published sermons. Today St. Francis de Sales is known as one of the great figures of the Catholic Counter-Reformation and of the 17th-century rebirth of Catholic mystical life.

St. Francis was born in 1567 in the castle belonging to the de Sales family in Thorens, Savoy, located in what is now southeastern France. His mother, Francoise, was only 14 years old when Francis, her firstborn, came into the world. This maternity was a dangerous one, the labor was long and difficult, and it was marvelled that both mother and child did not die. It is most noteworthy that a month before the birth Francoise had consecrated her unborn child to Our Lord in the presence of the Holy Shroud, which at that time was kept in the Sainte Chapelle in Chambéry, France.

Later, Francis was to have a great devotion to the Holy Shroud because his mother had been delivered much better than expected through her veneration of this holy relic. He considered the Shroud to be his country's shield and greatest relic. It was his favorite devotional picture, and he had numerous images of it painted, engraved and embroidered, placing them in his room, chapel, oratory, study, reception rooms and breviary. St. Francis de Sales wrote that his devotion to the Holy Shroud was due to the fact that "my mother, when I was still in her womb, dedicated me to Our Lord

before this holy banner of salvation.”

As he grew older, St. Francis de Sales studied literature, law, philosophy and theology in Paris and Padua. Upon finishing his studies, he received a doctorate in civil and canon law. Though he could have had a brilliant secular career, he set his soul on following the call of God to the priesthood, and was ordained in 1593 at the age of 26. He was consecrated Bishop of Geneva at age 35, and was to remain Bishop of Geneva for the remaining 20 years of his life. Some years after St. Francis de Sales took charge of Geneva, King Henry IV suggested to him the possibility of a transfer to a diocese with more worldly advantages; the saint replied in words that soon became famous all over Paris: “Sire, I have married a poor wife and I cannot desert her for a richer one.”

Shortly after becoming a bishop, St. Francis met St. Jane Frances de Chantal, a widow; between these two saints there grew a deep spiritual friendship. St. Francis became the spiritual director of Jane Frances, and with her, he founded in 1610 the religious order of nuns known as the Order of the Visitation, or the Visitandines.

Both of these saints loved the Heart of Jesus, and conceived this Heart as the particular treasure confided to the nuns of the Visitation. It is most remarkable that 60 years before the great revelations of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to the Visitandine St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1673-1675), St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane Frances de Chantal had very often spoken to their spiritual daughters of this sacred love. St. Francis de Sales stated that the Visitandines who followed the Rule would receive the privilege of bearing the title, “Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus,” and he gave to this institute, as coat-of-arms, the Heart of Jesus crowned with thorns. The religious wear this emblem emblazoned on their pectoral crosses.

Although devotion to the Heart of Jesus was at this time very little known, God was drawing these two souls to prepare the Visitation as a holy sanctuary to receive the famous

revelations to come. Also, the annals of the Order show that several Visitandines had experienced spiritual attractions toward, and even mystical favors from, the Heart of Jesus. Then, years later, with His revelations to St. Margaret Mary at the Visitation of Paray-le-Monial, God called this order to share with the entire Church that precious gift which had been its own special portion.

Among St. Francis de Sales' private papers collected after his death by St. Jane Frances de Chantal, there are many striking references to the Visitation's special calling to dwell in the Heart of Jesus and to love and imitate the two special virtues of His Heart, meekness and humility. "Learn of Me that I am meek and humble of Heart." In his sermons, too, St. Francis makes reference to the Heart of our Saviour and to the sacred Wound in His side. With the wisdom of hindsight, the reader can see how God in His Providence had chosen St. Francis de Sales to be, as it were, His "precursor," a preparer of hearts in anticipation of the great forthcoming revelation of His own Divine Heart.

The saintly bishop has left a description of an occasion in 1613, the feast of the Holy Shroud, when he was invited to be one of the prelates who exposed the holy relic for the veneration of the faithful. (It had been moved to Turin, Italy in 1578.) In a letter to St. Jane Frances de Chantal, he wrote: "A year ago, about this hour of the day, I was at Turin, exhibiting the Holy Shroud in the midst of a great crowd. Several drops of sweat, falling from my face, dropped upon the Holy Shroud itself, and thereupon, within my heart, I uttered this prayer: 'O Saviour of my life, deign to mingle my unworthy sweat with Thine and infuse into my blood, my life, and my affections the merits of this sacred moisture.' My dear Mother, the Prince Cardinal was angered because my sweat fell upon the Holy Shroud, but it came into my mind to tell him that our Saviour was not so nicely sensitive, and that He only shed His own sweat and blood in order to mingle them with ours, so as to give them the price of eternal life. And so may our sighs be joined with His that they ascend

before the Eternal Father like the smoke of fragrant incense.”

As a spiritual director, St. Francis de Sales was for a time the confessor of Blessed Marie of the Incarnation (Madame Barbe Acarie). This saintly woman was a wife, mother of six children, Parisian hostess, mystic, and foundress of five Carmelite convents.

St. Francis de Sales wrote two of the greatest Catholic masterpieces on the spiritual life: the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God*. The former shows how holiness is possible for all people in the state of grace, including people living in the world. This book was a best-seller in the 17th century and is still popular today. The *Treatise on the Love of God* covers all aspects of the virtue of charity, the supernatural love of God. St. Francis de Sales' pamphlets against the Calvinist heresy have been gathered together into a book and given the title *Controversies*. The arguments presented in this book are just as unanswerable today as when they were written. Because of his writings, St. Francis de Sales has become the patron of writers and journalists; he has also been designated patron saint of the Catholic press.

St. Francis de Sales died at age 55, in the year 1622. His beatification, which occurred the very year he died, was the first formal beatification ever held in St. Peter's Basilica. He was canonized in 1665, and was declared a Doctor of the Universal Church by Pope Pius IX in 1877. With this declaration the Church presented the teachings of St. Francis de Sales to all the faithful as a sure guide to true Catholic doctrine and the ways of the spiritual life—a sure guide to Heaven.

PREFACE

While Bishop of Geneva, St. Francis de Sales was in demand as a preacher both within and outside his diocese. As a result, four volumes of Sermons from the 26 volumes which comprise the Annecy edition of his works stand as written testimony to the manner in which he responded to those requests and the seriousness with which he viewed his duty as bishop to preach the Gospel of Christ. These sermons, compiled from the saint's own working notes, texts of sermons and fragments, cover every aspect of the liturgical year, as well as associated occurrences in the community life of the Visitation Order, which he co-founded with St. Jane de Chantal.

As a young priest and preacher St. Francis was consumed by a burning desire to proclaim the love of God to all people, regardless of social class or intellectual distinction. Therefore, he chose in preaching to adopt the homily as his style, long out of vogue in his day. From his experience in hearing the popular orators of Paris churches, St. Francis saw that if he were to be an effective preacher he would have to speak in a manner which the people could understand clearly, devoid of the accustomed elaborate rhetorical devices and seemingly endless Latin and Greek quotations. In using the homily form of preaching, St. Francis could reach out to everyone in a way which was simple and direct. However, in doing so, he risked his reputation and even prompted the following criticism from his father:

Provost, you preach too often; I hear the bell ring for sermons even on weekdays. In my day it was not so, preachings were much rarer; but what preachings, God knows! They were erudite, well thought out; more Latin

and Greek were quoted in one than you quote in ten; everyone was enraptured and edified; people used to go to sermons in crowds. Now you have made preaching so common, this will no longer happen and no one will think very much of you!

On the contrary, experience proved that it was this intimate and familiar form of preaching “from the heart” which strengthened the faith of the believer, caused many to return to the Church, and distinguished St. Francis as an outstanding preacher. Later in life he would advise a preacher to resist a preoccupation with form and endeavor to have a “heart to heart conversation” with the hearer, in which love itself would be the form and love itself would assure results:

I would not like people to say at the end of a sermon: “What a great orator he is!” “What a wonderful memory he has!” “How learned he is!” “How well he speaks!” . . . I would prefer that the hearer whose heart has been touched would testify to the preacher’s power solely by an amendment of life.

When St. Francis became bishop in 1602, this simple style practiced as a young priest, along with his growing popularity as a spiritual director and writer, guaranteed him a hearing and served as an effective means of bringing Christ to people and people to Christ!

The Council of Trent had taught that it was the bishop’s principal duty to preach. As bishop, St. Francis vowed to fulfill this task scrupulously whenever requested. When his own brother complained that other episcopal duties made it difficult for him to accept preaching engagements, St. Francis reminded him of his duty and emphasized that preaching must be accessible to all:

You are now a bishop and this is the time for you to learn what it is to which that title binds us. We must not be like those little trickles of water that spring from artificial rocks in the garden of great folk and to which

one scarcely dares approach. Such water is drawn only in silver goblets or goblets of crystal, and very little at a time, for fear of disturbing or checking the flow. To fulfill our office we must be like the great and open fountains from which water is taken in abundance, not only for men, but also, and even more frequently, by beasts—everything, even snakes, having free use of it. . . . We must never repulse anyone, even though our peace and comfort may have to suffer a little.

As important as the preaching of others might be, St. Francis was convinced that the bishop *in his person* held special power to inspire others through his preaching:

It is marvelous what great power a bishop's preaching has in comparison to that of other preachers. . . . Abundant as are the rivulets, people like to drink from the source itself.

The Lenten Sermons of St. Francis de Sales afford a rare opportunity to witness his dedication as bishop to his duty to preach, his unique homiletic style in the presentation of theological truths, and the love and devotion which inspired and gave power to his words.

In the 17th century, tradition had made Lent a special time in the Church year when a bishop would be invited by another bishop or a nobleman to preach a series of sermons to the people of a diocese or region. In the years of his episcopacy St. Francis had occasion to preach almost 20 such Lenten series, allowing him to touch a wide range of persons from every walk of life and social status. It was at just such a Lenten preaching engagement (1603) that he first encountered Madame de Chantal, with whom he would share a deep spiritual friendship. A biographer described the success of his Lenten sermons:

He spoke in his heart with God, and was therefore able to speak from his heart to the hearts of all who would hear him.

In his famed letter, *On the Preacher and Preaching*, St. Francis voiced the conviction which was the source of his effectiveness:

Our words must be set aflame not by shouts and unrestrained gestures, but by inward affection. They must issue from our heart rather than from our mouth. We must speak well, but heart speaks to heart, and the tongue speaks only to people's ears.

The "heart to heart conversation in love" shown in St. Francis' own preaching found its logical beginning and nourishment in the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Love. In Christ's Living Presence he could rekindle the divine intention in preaching by recalling Christ's own purpose: "I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly!" And through this personal encounter with the Eucharistic Christ, he likewise gained inspiration and guidance to bring that intention to fruition in himself and those who would hear him. The Lenten series of sermons preached at Chambéry (1606) attested that his personal holiness was the basis of his effectiveness as a preacher.

In a letter, St. Francis recounted that he had made a rather unpromising beginning and had moved very few of those who heard him. What appealed to the heart of his hearers was internal to his person. To intimidate the bishop, the Senate of Chambéry had publicly issued a threat concerning his property, a threat which he met with Christian fortitude. His patience and charity in the matter so excited the imagination of the people that churches became full for his sermons. The charism of his personal holiness broke down all resistance, as one biographer comments:

Tradition says that the contrast between the humility and gentleness evident in the Bishop of Geneva and the characteristics assigned to Catholic bishops by Calvinist legend broke down the prejudice which was the surest defense against his genius of persuasion . . . the personal

integrity of Francis de Sales being unassailable, and his patience under suspicion, deepened the impression of his personal life on his contemporaries.

St. Francis stated it even more simply: "To love well is sufficient for speaking well!" Besides this point, the story also illustrates that the disposition of the hearer is equally essential in the "heart to heart" communication on which St. Francis based his preaching.

A contemporary writer has accurately insisted that "More than half of every successful sermon is preached by the congregation." According to an incident which is said to have taken place during the Lenten series preached at Annecy, St. Francis agreed wholeheartedly.

The Saint had the habit of pausing at the beginning of a sermon and looking across the assembly ranged before him for a few silent moments. A member of the cathedral chapter ventured to ask him what his silence signified. "I salute the guardian angel of each one of my audience," he answered, "and I beg him to make the heart under his care ready for my words. Very great favors have come to me by this means."

Judging from his popularity as a preacher, St. Francis' prayer for his congregation brought the desired result—namely, that the heart of his hearer became "more animated" and "gained in strength and vigor," which was seen in an amendment of life. The "heart to heart conversation" of the homily, preacher and hearer, thus bore fruit because of the union effected by Christ's Love.

The Lenten sermons which follow, translated by the Visitation Sisters and edited by Fr. Lewis Fiorelli, O.S.F.S., were obviously meant to be heard, not read. Therefore, a great part of St. Francis' "heart to heart" preaching which made them so effective is undeniably and regrettably lacking. However, the fact that these sermons result from the loving efforts of persons intimately living St. Francis de Sales' spirit, as his spiritual sons and daughters, can be perceived as some-

thing issuing from his own heart. If it were not for their labor of love, very few indeed would have even this opportunity of experiencing the personal charism of the saint.

As noted, the dispositions of the reader are equally important if the spiritual profit originally intended by the author is to be gained through these sermons. The emphasis of Vatican Council II on preaching, in particular the homily, reflected in the saint's teaching and practice, should in its own way lead to a receptivity in the reader's heart.

Though the selection of Lenten sermons was intended for cloistered religious, their message is equally valuable to the lay reader, who has only to use his judgment in making application according to his state in life. In fact, the lay reader has the rare opportunity of profiting from the fatherly counsel of St. Francis de Sales which reveals his "secret heart" in the informal setting of the convent and garden of his spiritual daughters. The virtues encouraged for religious are also required for the laity, if both are in their own way to respond generously to the Council's Universal Call to Holiness. Other reasons of disposition must be left to personal interest. However, in approaching these sermons the reader can in faith proceed with the assurance that the heart has already been uniquely led to a beneficial posture through the family of St. Francis de Sales, who, after the saint's example, have offered preparation through prayer! LIVE + JESUS!

Rev. John A. Abruzzese, S.T.D.
Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops
Vatican City State

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The twelve sermons for Lent contained in this book were translated from St. Francis de Sales' *Oeuvres*, vol. X (Annecy: Niérat, 1892-1964).

The first volume of this series, *Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Prayer*, includes an Introduction on the Origins and Value of the Sermons which was also taken from the Annecy edition.



Studio Fotografica Nazionale, Fratelli Dutto

The Holy Shroud, the burial sheet of Our Lord Jesus Christ, showing the great outflow of blood from His pierced right side—see the white area at left. (*Grateful acknowledgements to Father Peter Rinaldi, S.D.B. for obtaining this beautiful photograph.*)

“What will we do, what will we become, I ask you, when in Heaven, through the Sacred Wound of His side, we perceive that most adorable and most lovable Heart of our Master, aflame with love for us—that Heart where we will see each of our names written in letters of love!”

—St. Francis de Sales

FASTING

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, February 9, 1622, concerning the spiritual fruits of fasting and the conditions which make fasting pleasing to God: fasting universally, that is, with all the senses and with the understanding, memory, and the appetites of the will; how completely the primitive Christians fasted, fasting through humility rather than through vanity, fasting through obedience rather than through self-will, following the community customs in fasting rather than seeking to be singular, fasting only to please God and not for the esteem of men, and the evil of subjecting the commands of God and our superiors to our own human discretion.

These first four days of the holy season of Lent serve as a preface to indicate the preparation that we ought to make in order to spend Lent well and to dispose ourselves to fast well. That is why I thought of speaking to you, in this exhortation, of the conditions which render fasting good and meritorious. I will speak as briefly and as familiarly as possible, not only today but in the discourses that I will address to you every Thursday during this Lent. All will be as simple and proper for your hearts as I can make them.

To treat of fasting and of what is required to fast well, we must, at the start, understand that of itself fasting is not a virtue. The good and the bad, as well as Christians and pagans, observe it. The ancient philosophers observed it and recommended it. They were not virtuous for that reason, nor did they practice virtue in fasting. Oh, no, fasting is a virtue

only when it is accompanied by conditions which render it pleasing to God. Thus it happens that it profits some and not others, because it is not undertaken by all in the same manner.

We find some people who think that to fast well during the holy season of Lent it is enough to abstain from eating some prohibited food. But this thought is too gross to enter into the hearts of religious, for it is to you I speak, as well as persons dedicated to Our Lord. We know very well that it is not enough to fast exteriorly if we do not also fast interiorly and if we do not accompany the fast of the body with that of the spirit.

That is why our Divine Master, who instituted the fast, greatly desired in His Sermon on the Mount to teach His Apostles how it must be practiced [*Matt.* 6:16-18], which is a matter of great profit and utility (for it would not have been becoming to the greatness and majesty of God to teach a useless doctrine. That could not be.). He knew that to draw strength and efficacy from fasting, something more than abstinence from prohibited food is necessary. Thus He instructed them and, consequently, disposed them to gather the fruits proper to fasting. Among many others are these four: fasting fortifies the spirit, mortifying the flesh and its sensuality; it raises the spirit to God; it fights concupiscence and gives power to conquer and deaden its passions; in short, it disposes the heart to seek to please only God with great purity of heart.

It will be very helpful to state clearly what must be done to fast well these forty days. For although everyone is bound to know it and to practice it, religious and persons dedicated to Our Lord are more particularly obliged to it. Now, among all the conditions required for fasting well, I will select three principal ones and speak familiarly about them.

The first condition is that we must fast with our whole heart, that is to say, willingly, whole-heartedly, universally and entirely. If I recount to you St. Bernard's words regarding fasting, you will know not only why it is instituted but also how it ought to be kept.

He says that fasting was instituted by Our Lord as a remedy for our mouth, for our gourmandizing and for our gluttony. Since sin entered the world through the mouth, the mouth must do penance by being deprived of foods prohibited and forbidden by the Church, abstaining from them for the space of forty days. But this glorious saint adds that, as it is not our mouth alone which has sinned, but also all our other senses, our fast must be general and entire, that is, all the members of our body must fast. For if we have offended God through the eyes, through the ears, through the tongue, and through our other senses, why should we not make them fast as well? And not only must we make the bodily senses fast, but also the soul's powers and passions—yes, even the understanding, the memory, and the will, since we have sinned through both body and spirit.

How many sins have entered into the soul through the eyes, as Holy Scripture indicates? [*1 Jn.* 2:16]. That is why they must fast by keeping them lowered and not permitting them to look upon frivolous and unlawful objects; the ears, by depriving them of listening to vain talk which serves only to fill the mind with worldly images; the tongue, in not speaking idle words and those which savor of the world or the things of the world. We ought also to cut off useless thoughts, as well as vain memories and superfluous appetites and desires of our will. In short, we ought to hold in check all those things which keep us from loving or tending to the Sovereign Good. In this way interior fasting accompanies exterior fasting.

This is what the Church wishes to signify during this holy time of Lent, teaching us to make our eyes, our ears and our tongue fast. For this reason she omits all harmonious chants in order to mortify the hearing; she no longer says *Alleluia*, and clothes herself completely in somber and dark colors. And on this first day she addresses us in these words: Remember, man, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return [*Gen.* 3:19], as if she meant to say: “Oh man, quit at this moment all joys and merrymaking, all joyful and pleasant reflections, and fill your memory with bitter, hard

and sorrowful thoughts. In this way you will make your mind fast together with your body.”

This is also what the Christians of the primitive Church taught us when, in order to spend Lent in a better way, they deprived themselves at this time of ordinary conversations with their friends, and withdrew into great solitude and places removed from communication with people. For the same reason, the ancient Fathers and the Christians of the year 400 or so were so careful to spend these forty days well that they were not satisfied with abstaining from prohibited meats, but even abstained from eggs, fish, milk and butter, and lived on herbs and roots alone. And not content with making their bodies fast in this manner, they made their minds and all the powers of the soul fast also. They placed sackcloth on their heads in order to learn to keep their eyes lowered. They sprinkled ashes on their heads as a sign of penitence. They withdrew into solitude to mortify the tongue and hearing, neither speaking nor hearing anything vain and useless. At that time they practiced great and austere penances by which they subjected their body and made all its members fast. They did all this with full liberty, neither forced nor constrained. Note how their fast was accomplished whole-heartedly and universally; for they understood very well that since not only the mouth has sinned, but also all the other senses of our bodies and powers of our soul, the passions and appetites are full of iniquities. It is thus reasonable that, in order to make our fast complete and meritorious, it should be universal, that is to say, practiced in both body and spirit. This is the first condition to be observed in order to fast well.

The second condition is never to fast through vanity but always through humility. If our fast is not performed with humility, it will not be pleasing to God. All our ancient Fathers have declared it so, but particularly St. Thomas, St. Ambrose and the great St. Augustine. St. Paul in the epistle that he wrote to the Corinthians [*I Cor.* 13], which was read last Sunday, declared the conditions necessary for disposing ourselves to fast well during Lent. He says this to us: Lent

is approaching. Prepare yourselves to fast with charity, for if your fast is performed without it, it will be vain and useless, since fasting, like all other good works, is not pleasing to God unless it is done in charity and through charity. When you discipline yourself, when you say long prayers, if you have not charity, all that is nothing. Even though you should work miracles, if you have not charity, they will not profit you at all. Indeed, even if you should suffer martyrdom without charity, your martyrdom is worth nothing and would not be meritorious in the eyes of the Divine Majesty. For all works, small or great, however good they may be in themselves, are of no value and profit us nothing if they are not done in charity and through charity.

I say the same now: if your fast is without humility, it is worth nothing and cannot be pleasing to the Lord. Pagan philosophers fasted thus, and their fast was not accepted by God. Sinners fast in this way, but because they do not have humility it is of no profit at all to them. Now, according to the Apostle, all that is done without charity is not pleasing to God; so I say in the same way, with this great saint, that if you fast without humility your fast is of no value. For if you have not humility, you have not charity, and if you are without charity you are also without humility. It is almost impossible to have charity without being humble and to be humble without having charity. These two virtues have such an affinity with one another that the one can never be without the other.¹

But what is it to fast through humility? It is never to fast through vanity. Now how can one fast through vanity? According to Scripture there are hundreds and hundreds of ways, but I will content myself with telling you one of them, for it is not necessary to burden your memory with many things. To fast through vanity is to fast through self-will, since this self-will is not without vanity, or at least not without a temptation to vanity. And what does it mean to fast through self-will? It is to fast as one wishes and not as others wish; to fast in the manner which pleases us, and not as we are ordered

or counseled. You will find some who wish to fast more than is necessary, and others who do not wish to fast as much as is necessary. What causes that except vanity and self-will? All that proceeds from ourselves seems better to us, and is much more pleasant and easy for us than what is enjoined on us by another, even though the latter is more useful and proper for our perfection. This is natural to us and is born from the great love we have for ourselves.

Let each one of us examine our conscience and we will find that all that comes from ourselves, from our own judgment, choice and election, is esteemed and loved far better than that which comes from another. We take a certain complacency in it that makes the most arduous and difficult things easy for us, and this complacency is almost always vanity. You will find those who wish to fast every Saturday of the year, but not during Lent.² They wish to fast in honor of Our Lady and not in honor of Our Lord. As if Our Lord and Our Lady did not consider the honor given to the one as given to the other, and as if in honoring the Son by fasting done for His intention, one did not please the Mother, or that in honoring the Virgin one did not please the Saviour! What folly! But see how human it is: because the fast that these persons impose on themselves on Saturday in honor of our glorious Mistress comes from their own will and choice, it seems to them that it should be more holy and that it should bring them to a much greater perfection than the fast of Lent, which is commanded. Such people do not fast as they ought but as they want.

There are others who desire to fast more than they should, and with these one has more trouble than with the first group. On this matter the great Apostle complains [*Rom.* 14:1-6], saying that we find ourselves confronted by two groups of people. Some do not wish to fast as much as they ought, and cannot be satisfied with the food permitted (this is what many worldly people still do today who allege a thousand reasons on this subject; but I am not here to speak of such things, for it is to religious I am addressing myself). The

others, says St. Paul, wish to fast more than is necessary. It is with these that we have more trouble. We can easily and clearly show the first that they contravene the law of God, and that in not fasting as much as they should, while able to do it, they transgress the commandments of the Lord. But we have more difficulty with the weak and infirm who are not strong enough for fasting. They will not listen to reason, nor can they be persuaded that they are not bound by it [the law of fasting], and despite all our reasons they insist on fasting more than is required, not wishing to use the food we order them. These people do not fast through humility, but through vanity. They do not recognize that, being weak and infirm, they would do much more for God in not fasting through the command of another and using the food ordered them, than in wishing to abstain through self-will. For although, on account of their weakness, their mouth cannot abstain, they should make the other senses of the body fast, as well as the passions and powers of the soul.

You are not, says Our Lord, to look gloomy and melancholic like the hypocrites do when they fast in order to be praised by men and esteemed as great abstainers.³ [*Matt.* 6:16-18]. But let your fasting be done in secret; therefore, wash your face, anoint your head, and your heavenly Father who sees what is hidden in your heart will reward you well. Our Divine Master did not mean by this that we ought to have no care about the edification of the neighbor. Oh, no, for St. Paul says [*Phil.* 4:5]: Let your modesty be known to all. Those who fast during the holy season of Lent ought not to conceal it, since the Church orders this fast and wishes that everyone should know that we are observing it. We must not, then, deny this to those who expect it of us for their edification, since we are obliged to remove every cause of scandal to our brothers. But when Our Lord said: Fast in secret, He wanted us to understand: do not do it to be seen or esteemed by creatures; do not do your works for the eyes of men. Be careful to edify them well, but not in order that they might esteem you as holy and virtuous. Do not be like

the hypocrites. Do not try to appear better than others in practicing more fasting and penances than they.

The glorious St. Augustine, in the Rule that he wrote for his religious (later adapted for men religious), orders that one follow the community as much as possible, as if he wished to say: Do not be more virtuous than the others; do not wish to practice more fasting, more austerities, more mortifications than are ordered for you. Do only what the others do and what is commanded by your Rule, according to the manner of living that you follow, and be content with that. For although fasting and other penances are good and laudable, nevertheless, if they are not practiced by those with whom you live, you will stand out and there will be some vanity, or at least some temptation to esteem yourself above others. Since they do not do as you do, you experience some vain complacency, as if you were more holy than they in doing such things.

Follow the community then in all things, said the great St. Augustine. Let the strong and robust eat what is ordered them, keeping the fast and austerities which are marked, and let them be content with that. Let the weak and infirm receive what is offered them for their infirmity, without wishing to do what the robust do. Let neither group amuse themselves in looking to see what this one eats and what that one does not eat, but let each one remain satisfied with what she has and with what is given to her. By this means you will avoid vanity and being particular.⁴

Let no one introduce examples here to prove that there is not so much wrong, after all, in not following the common life. Do not tell me, for instance, that St. Paul the first hermit lived for ninety years in a grotto without hearing Holy Mass, and therefore that instead of going to the Office I must remain retired and in solitude in my room in order to have ecstasies and ravishments there. Oh! do not cite that to me, for what St. Paul did was done through a particular inspiration which God desires to be admired but not imitated by all. God inspired him to go to this very extraordinary retreat

in order that deserts might become better esteemed, for at that time they were uninhabited.⁵ Later they became inhabited by many holy Fathers. It was not, however, so that everyone should actually follow St. Paul's example. Rather, it was that he might be a mirror and marvel of virtues, worthy to be admired but not imitated by all. Do not bring up the example of St. Simon Stylites either. He remained forty-four years on a column, making two hundred acts of adoration each day while genuflecting. Like St. Paul, he acted in this manner by a very special inspiration. God wished to show in this a miracle of holiness, how we are called to, and can lead in this world, a life all heavenly and angelic.

Let us, then, admire all these things, but do not tell me that it would be better to retire apart in imitation of these great saints and not mingle with others or do what they do, but to give oneself up to great penances. Oh, no, says St. Augustine, do not appear more virtuous than others. Be content to do what they do. Accomplish your good works in secret and not for the eyes of others. Do not act like the spider, who represents the proud; but imitate the bee, who is the symbol of the humble soul. The spider spins its web where everyone can see it, and never in secret. It spins in orchards, going from tree to tree, in houses, on windows, on floors—in short, before the eyes of all. In this it resembles the vain and hypocritical who do everything to be seen and admired by others. Their works are in fact only spiders' webs, fit to be cast into the fires of Hell. But the bees are wiser and more prudent, for they prepare their honey in the hive where no one can see them. Besides that, they build little cells where they continue their work in secret. This represents very well the humble soul, who is always withdrawn within herself, without seeking any glory or praise for her actions. Rather, she keeps her intention hidden, being content that God sees and knows what she does.

I will give you an example of this, but familiarly, for this is how I wish to deal with you. It is concerning St. Pachomius, that illustrious Father of religious, about whom I have often

spoken to you. He was walking one day with some of those good Fathers of the desert, conversing on pious and devout subjects. For, you see, these great saints never spoke of vain and useless things. All their conversation was about good things. Now, during this conference one of the religious, who had made two mats in one day, came to stretch them out in the sun in the presence of all of these Fathers. They all saw him, but not one of them wondered why he did it, for they were not accustomed to pry into the actions of others. They believed that their Brother did this quite simply and so they drew no conclusion from it. They did not censure the action of the other. They were not like those who always sift the actions of the neighbor, composing books, commentaries and interpretations on all they see.

These good religious thought nothing, then, about the one who stretched out his two mats. But St. Pachomius, who was his superior and to whom alone belonged the duty to examine the intention that motivated him, began to consider this action a little. And as God always gives His light to those who serve Him, He made known to the saint that this Brother was led by a spirit of vanity and complacency over his two mats, and that he had done this in order that he and all the Fathers might see how much he had labored that day.

You see, these ancient religious gained their livelihood by the labor of their hands. They were employed not at what they wished or liked, but rather at what they had been ordered. They exercised their bodies by manual labor and their minds by prayer and meditation, thus joining action to contemplation. Now, their most ordinary occupation was the weaving of mats. Everyone was obliged to make one a day. The Brother of whom we are speaking, having made two of them, thought for that reason that he was better than the others. That is why he came to stretch them in the sun before everyone, so that they would know it. But St. Pachomius, who had the spirit of God, made him throw them into the fire, and asked all the religious to pray for him who had labored for Hell. Then he had him put in prison for five months

as a penance for his fault, in order to serve as an example to the others and to teach them to perform their tasks with humility.

Do not allow your fast to resemble that of hypocrites, who wear melancholy faces and who consider holy only those who are emaciated. What folly! As if holiness consisted in being thin! Certainly St. Thomas Aquinas was not thin; he was very stout. And yet he was holy. In the same way there are many others who, though not thin, nevertheless fail not to be very austere and excellent servants of God. But the world, which regards only the exterior, considers only those holy who are pale and wasted. Consider a little this human spirit: it takes account only of appearances and, being vain, does its works to be seen by others. Our Lord tells you not to do as they do but to let your fast be done in secret, only for the eyes of your heavenly Father, and He will see you and reward you.

The third condition necessary for fasting well is to look to God and to do everything to please Him, withdrawing within ourselves in imitation of a great saint, St. Gregory the Great, who withdrew into a secret and out-of-the-way place where he remained for some time without anyone knowing where he was, being content that the Lord and His angels knew it.

Although everyone ought to seek to please God alone, religious and persons who are dedicated to Him ought to take particular care to do this, seeing only Him, and being satisfied that He alone sees their works, content to await their reward only from Him. This is what Cassian, that great Father of the spiritual life, teaches us so well in the book of his admirable Conferences. (Many saints held it in such esteem that they never went to bed without reading a chapter from it to recollect their mind in God.) He says: What will it profit you to do what you are doing for the eyes of creatures? Nothing but vanity and complacency, which are good for Hell alone. But if you keep your fast and do all your works to please God alone, you will labor for eternity, without delighting in yourself or caring whether you are seen

by others or not, since what you do is not done for them, nor do you await your recompense from them. We must keep our fast with humility and truth, and not with lying and hypocrisy—that is, we must fast for God and to please Him alone.

We must not make use of much learned discussion and discernment to understand why the fast is commanded, whether it is for all or only for some. Everyone knows that it is ordered in expiation for the sin of our first father, Adam, who sinned in breaking the fast which was enjoined upon him by the prohibition to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. For this our mouth must do penance by abstaining from prohibited foods. Many have difficulties on this subject. But I am not here to address them, still less to say who are obliged to fast. Oh, no! for no one is ignorant that children are not bound to fast, nor are persons sixty years of age.

Let us rather continue, and see by way of three examples how dangerous a thing it is to wish to make deliberations of all sorts on the commandments of God or of our superiors. Two are drawn from Holy Scripture and the other from the Life of St. Pachomius. The first is that of Adam, who received from God the commandment not to eat the forbidden fruit under pain of losing life itself. The serpent came and advised Eve to break this commandment. She listened to him and prevailed over her husband. They discussed the prohibition which was made to them, saying: “Indeed! even though God has threatened us with death, we shall surely not die, for He has not created us to die.” They ate it, and died a spiritual death.⁶ [*Gen.* 3:1-6].

The second example is that of certain of Our Lord’s disciples who, when they heard Him speak of giving them His flesh and His blood as food and drink, scrutinized and wondered, and questioned how anyone could eat the flesh and drink the blood of a man. But since they desired to deliberate so much about it, our Divine Master rejected them. [*Jn.* 6:61-67].

The third example is drawn from the Life of St. Pachomius. When leaving his monastery one day for some affair that

he had in the great abbey of his order, where three thousand monks lived, he recommended that his Brothers take special care of several young religious who had come to him under a particular inspiration. As the holiness of these desert Fathers spread, poor young children would come and beg the saint to receive them into this life. Knowing they were sent by God, he received them and gave them very special care. That is why when he was leaving he very carefully recommended that they should take recreation and eat cooked herbs. Think of all the attention that was given to these children! But once the holy Father had left, the old religious, pretending to be more austere, no longer wished to eat cooked herbs, but were satisfied rather with eating raw ones. Seeing this, those who prepared them thought it would be a waste of time to cook them, since no one took them but these children.

Now, when St. Pachomius returned, they came out like bees running before him. Some kissed his hand and some his robe, welcoming their dear Father. Finally, one young religious came and said to him: "Oh, my Father, how I longed for your return, for we have not eaten cooked herbs since you left!" Hearing this, St. Pachomius was very much touched, and called for the cook. He asked him why he had not cooked the herbs. The latter answered that it was because no one except the children would eat them, and that he thought it a waste of time. But he insisted that he had not taken any rest either. Rather, he had made mats.

Hearing this, the holy Father gave him a good correction in the presence of everyone. Then he commanded that all his mats be cast into the fire, saying that it was necessary to burn all that was done without obedience. "For," he added, "I knew well what was proper for these children, that they must not be treated like older ones, and yet you wanted, against obedience, to make these kinds of deliberations." This is how those who forget the orders and commandments of God and who make their own interpretations, or who wish to reason about the things commanded, place themselves in peril of death. For all their labor, accomplished according

to their own will or human discretion, is worthy of the fire.

This is all that I had to tell you regarding fasting and what must be observed in order to fast well. The first thing is that your fast should be entire and universal; that is, that you should make all the members of your body and the powers of your soul fast: keeping your eyes lowered, or at least lower than ordinarily; keeping better silence, or at least keeping it more punctually than is usual; mortifying the hearing and the tongue so that you will no longer hear or speak of anything vain or useless; the understanding, in order to consider only holy and pious subjects; the memory, in filling it with the remembrance of bitter and sorrowful things and avoiding joyous and gracious thoughts; keeping your will in check and your spirit at the foot of the crucifix with some holy and sorrowful thought. If you do that, your fast will be universal, interior and exterior, for you will mortify both your body and your spirit. The second condition is that you do not observe your fast or perform your works for the eyes of others. And the third is that you do all your actions, and consequently your fasting, to please God alone, to whom be honor and glory forever and ever.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

NOTES

1. Cf. *The Spiritual Conferences of St. Francis de Sales* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1962), Conference VIII, "On Self-Renouncement," p. 136; *Sermons of St. Francis de Sales on Our Lady*, Vol. II of this series (TAN Books, 1985), "The Annunciation," Mar. 25, 1621, p. 147.
2. Cf. St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 1975), Book X, chap. 9; *Sermons on Our Lady*, "The Purification," Feb. 2, 1622, p. 184.
3. Cf. p. 2 of this sermon.
4. Cf. *Spiritual Conferences* I, pp. 12-13.
5. St. Francis de Sales is speaking of the early stages of monastic life, centered in the desert, and of the special people who, under inspiration from God, were instrumental in establishing this form of religious life.
6. Cf. *Sermons on Our Lady*, "The Purification," Feb. 2, 1622, pp. 179-181.