

Ash Wednesday (Feb. 17)

Brothers and sisters, we are once more in the midst of the holy season of Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday. Our Holy Mother, the Church, sets before her children as an example, all things of our Savior. And inasmuch as he, led by the Holy Spirit, went into the wilderness and fasted forty days and forty nights, so the Church has instituted for us this holy season of Lent in order that in some degree at least, we may imitate our Savior in this regard. It is a time when we ought to seek our greater sanctification and enter into the spirit of these forty days, in order that, as spiritual athletes, we may run more diligently and more effectively in the race that is set before us, which has as its final goal the attainment of the Beatific Vision.

The principle of self-denial is fundamental to our holy religion. Jesus said, "Except a man take up his cross and deny himself daily, he cannot be my disciple." [Lk.9:23] There are multitudes of people who have rejected Christ just on account of this self-denial and this taking up of the cross. They do not want to deny themselves in anything. They want to walk after the sight of their eyes and after the desires of the carnal man to the limit, but any religion that invites them to a crucifixion of self or carrying of a cross, they reject.

Dives feasted sumptuously every day. He did not restrain himself in the least, but the time came, when there was a funeral and Mr. Dives' fine body, that was clothed in linen and gorgeous purple every day, was put under the ground and a whole army of worms came and made a feast on him. And Mr. Dives found himself in a place of torment where he could not even have a drop of water to satisfy the thirst which he had indulged so freely during his life. "He that sows to the field of self-indulgence will get a harvest of corruption out of it." [Gal.6:8] That is the divine law and there is no escape from it.

Now, we are to understand the wisdom and the purpose of God behind the life of imitating Christ. Our Lord was led by the Holy Spirit that "does all things well." [See Acts. 10:38] When he went into the wilderness to fast and to pray for forty days, he had a purpose in it. He was preparing for a spiritual combat with the devil. He went through the combat and came out triumphant, and then, when the devil left him, the angels came and ministered to him.

The devil playing upon the great exhaustion and hunger which Christ had after fasting so long, invited him to exercise his power independent of the will of the Father, by converting stones into bread. The answer was, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," [Lk.4:4; Dt. 8:3] and when the devil was finished and our Lord won the victory over him, then was the time to take nourishment. He did not have to turn the stones into bread, but these angels brought him food, delicious food, and he was refreshed after his long fast.

He wishes us for a little while through this desert of sin, to exercise discipline and a certain degree of fasting, nothing extraordinary, just enough to make things wholesome for us, and then he invites us to the banquet of the saints through eternity. But

in the midst of this pilgrimage of the world, he is not unmindful of our needs, and so he gives to us a wonderful refreshment.

If we are faithful and practice our religion, he gives us a bread that “comes down from Heaven.” [Jn.6:50] And as he himself said, “The bread that I will give is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world,” [Jn.6:52] and he gives us that in the Holy Eucharist.

The banquet is spread every day. Every day this new manna comes down from Heaven at the words of the priest in the consecration of the host. Under the hands and at the words of the priest, though the outer appearance remains the same, the substance of the host is changed into the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ, and this is offered by the loving Savior for the nourishment of his people. And that bread ought to be our delight, our viaticum, our nourishment as we travel along the journey of life, sustained and refreshed by it. And if we use it rightly and with the proper dispositions and follow the directions of the divine physician about conducting our life according to his holy Commandments, we shall be immensely refreshed and immensely consoled by that heavenly banquet, the sweetness of which does not pall upon the taste as we receive it more frequently, but rather increases by the frequentation with which it is received. (Fr. Paul Sermon First Sunday of Lent , Feb. 21, 1926)