

St. Francis de Sales Ash Wednesday Sermon 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 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 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, by not speaking idle words and those which savor of the world or the things of the world. 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 hold 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 men, 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 wholeheartedly and universally; for they understood very well that since not only the mouth has sinned, but also all the other sense 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 [1 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 the 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. 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. 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 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. [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 says: 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 the 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. 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. 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 the 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 his 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 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 he 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. [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 a 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 some day for some affair that he had in the great abbey of his order, where three thousand monks lived, he recommended that his Brother 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 though 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 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 Ghost. Amen.