

Dearly beloved,

Today we begin the season of Septuagesima, a period of two and half weeks given by the Church to prepare us for the rigor of Lent. Both because Lent is so intense and difficult, especially due to the forty day fast, and because Lent is so important for our lives as Christians, since it is a period that makes us for our negligences the rest of the year, the Church does not want us to take Lent too lightly, nor be unprepared for it when it arrives. As St. Francis de Sales said, “Lent is the autumn of the spiritual life during which we gather fruit for the rest of the year. Enrich yourselves with these treasures.”

During Lent, the liturgy often repeats the phrase from Isaiah, *Quaerite Dominum dum inveniri potest, invocate eum dum prope est*—Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Lent is a time when God is particularly near to us, especially eager to help us reform our lives and grow in virtue, and He makes this possible principally by giving more abundant grace to seek Him. Septuagesima is also a special time for seeking God, a time in which we should slow down, cut back, and focus again on the things that matter. Whereas we plunge right into Advent, we cannot properly live Lent unless we first begin to prepare for it by deliberate choices now to seek the Lord in times and places when and where dissipation is the norm for us. That Septuagesima is a time for seeking the Lord is made evident by its mention in the both the Gradual and the Postcommunion prayer. The former assures us that God does not abandon those who seek Him, and the latter asks the Lord that by receiving the sacraments we may seek them more, and by seeking them, possess them forever. And at Matins, we begin to read Genesis, which tells us why we must seek the Lord—our first parents sinned against Him, and from that time the human race has hidden from God, refusing to acknowledge its guilt.

So how do we seek the Lord? The principal means are prayer and penance, and given St. Paul’s epistle for today it is fitting to speak on penance. Penance can be considered in a twofold way, as active penance and passive penance, or better said, receptive penance. Paul says that just as the athlete trains to win a race by proper diet and exercise, so we train to win eternal life by keeping our bodies in check. This is active penance, the kind that is lived out by doing difficult things for the love of God and out of sorrow for our sins. Examples of such difficult things are many: fasting, abstinence from meat or alcohol, doing the stations of the Cross, praying the penitential psalms, limiting or eliminating social media and the internet. Almost any spiritual or physical activity that checks our will can function as a true penance, provided we do it for the right reason.

This active penance is necessary to every Christian. Although a life of penance is standard for those in religious life, there is no Catholic who can hope to get to heaven or grow in virtue without practicing penance on a regular basis. We should do so especially to curb bad habits that lead us to further sin and to counter our tendency to slide back to general apathy in regard to spiritual things. For most of us, gluttony is the door to various sins, ranging from sloth to lust, and therefore we should always be on guard against it. This can be done by occasionally omitting items from our daily fare that increase the pleasure of eating or drinking but are not necessary, as well as only eating at meals. At times, we should also fast, for there is no greater remedy for all sins than fasting, and it often stabilizes us in the spirit because of the great force of will required to keep ourselves from eating.

Another general habit of active penance necessary to all is that of prayer. Since we tend to neglect prayer, there must be times when we make up for our negligence by longer periods of prayer, or more intense periods. If we do the same thing all the time and never offer more to God, we will not grow. Ultimately it is because our charity is cold that we will not stop our favorite activity and give more time to God when we know that we ought to do so. There are times when we should commit to spending an entire hour with the Lord even if our daily prayer is usually less than that, and there are times when we should pray an entire rosary when the priest gives us a decade as a penance. Love of God should drive us, rather than love of comfort.

The other type of penance is receptive penance. It cannot be called passive penance because no true penance is passive; it is penance precisely because the penitent chooses to do this or that out of love of God and to do reparation for sin. But receptive penance is distinct from active penance because it accepts the difficult things

that come to us rather than choosing to do difficult things. This too is necessary to the Christian life, since we cannot avoid evil, misfortune and disappointment, and therefore we must learn to embrace it and transform it into something good. The source of this kind of penance can be in regards to something profound and very hurtful, or something simple that doesn't go our way. Whatever causes us physical or spiritual pain is worthy of being offered to God, and we should strive to waste none of these opportunities. And since life is usually filled more with penances we didn't want rather ones we've freely chosen, receptive penance is, in a way, more fundamental than active penance; it is also more universal because not everyone can fast, not everyone can deprive themselves of sleep, but everyone can accept the evils of life and sanctify them by humble and loving submission to God's will.

And thus ultimately all penance concerns the virtue of charity, that virtue by which we love God for His own sake and others out of love of Him. Charity makes us truly contrite for our sins, and eager to make reparation; it also fears being separated from God and so takes steps to keep from sinning again. It does not think of penance as something imposed by the Church such that once I have done my duty I can relax; rather it says that the Church guides us to do something that should be ever more and more an aspect of our spiritual lives. Charity moves us to do penance for those who will not, either out of negligence, lack of knowledge, or hatred of God. And most of all, charity sees life as the parable in the Gospel—our seeking the Lord is actually Him seeking us, and our willingness to work in His vineyard is a response of love through penance, both active and receptive. Through the Holy Spirit asking us to pray and do penance, God is again seeking us out, just as He did Adam and Eve; He is asking us to let Him find us so that He can forgive us and strengthen us through dwelling in our souls like He did in the beginning, before sin. And so let us strive never to refuse one of His inspirations, however small, and to give our hearts and our bodies to Him without fear.

Today, then, as we receive Holy Communion, let us ask our Savior to increase His charity within us. This sacrament is called the sacrament of charity by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, for it is the fruit of Jesus' Passion, His gift to us from the Cross so that we might live. And because it comes from such love, it necessarily increases divine love within us, if only we are open to it. It has the power to make our hearts burn with love and wish to return love for love, at whatever cost. St. Maximilian Kolbe says, "You come to me and unite Yourself intimately to me under the form of nourishment. Your Blood now runs in mine, Your Soul, Incarnate God, compenetrates mine, giving courage and support." May that Precious Blood run in ours today and each day, until we shall reach the source of that Blood, and be refreshed at the sight of His face in heaven, unto the ages of ages.