St. Anthony Mary Claret

SUNDAY HOMILIES, VOLUME V

Colección de pláticas dominicales, tercer año

From the Spanish of the first edition (Barcelona, 1859)

English translation

Contributed to Mind of the Church by a friend of the library who wishes to remain anonymous

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

About this translation · 3
2. First Sunday of Lent: On the Lenten Fast · 3
First Point · 3
Second Point · 5

About this translation

The *Colección de pláticas dominicales* (Barcelona: Librería Religiosa, 1858–1859, seven volumes) was compiled and published by St. Anthony Mary Claret, then Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, for the use of parish priests. Its title page says that he “formed and gathered” it “from the most classic authors”: the sermons are drawn from other preachers, who are not named, and are given here as sermons of Claret's collection, not as his own compositions. Translated from the edition of 1858–1859. From Volume V so far only the sermon for the First Sunday of Lent (pp. 131–138) has been translated; the rest of the volume will be added as it is done.

The notes give the references to Claret's sources and the notes he printed himself; the modern editors' commentary and the translator's own remarks are not reproduced.

2. First Sunday of Lent: On the Lenten Fast

Collection of Sunday Pláticas, Third Year. Vol. V, pp. 131–138. Plática for the First Sunday of Lent. Gospel: Matthew 4:1–11 (the fast and temptation of Christ in the desert; the book does not print the Gospel text). Original preacher not named.

> *Cum jejunasset quadraginta diebus, et quadraginta noctibus, postea esuriit (Matth. 4:2).*
>
> *Jesus Christ, after a fast of forty days and forty nights, was hungry.*

1. In the Gospel of this First Sunday of Lent the Church sets before us the fast and temptation of Jesus Christ in the desert. This shows us that, since Jesus Christ, who was by nature incapable of sin, allowed the devil to tempt him, temptation is unavoidable for every Christian: that in this life we must expect it and prepare for it; and that the means of resisting it does not lie in supposing that we shall not be tempted, but in learning from Jesus Christ that, if we wish to overcome the tempter, we must fast and deprive ourselves of the possession of creatures, which he ordinarily uses to make us fall into his snares. For it must be noted that the devil is not properly the author of the temptations he uses against us: our own passions serve him as weapons; he finds them in us and stirs them up against ourselves. To weaken temptations we must practise all that helps to lessen our passions, and for this there is nothing better than fasting, which is a medicine equally useful to our souls and to our bodies, as the Church says: *Quod corporibus animabusque curandis salubriter institutum est.*[1]

2. Well then, my brethren, what could I announce to you that would be of greater comfort to you, or more advantageous for your salvation, than this law of fasting which you began to keep a few days ago? But, fearing that the tempter may bring you to the point of breaking it \[*os ponga en la precisión de violarla*\], I find myself obliged to encourage you to continue this holy exercise. The most pressing motive that can be put before you is the example of Jesus Christ, who was pleased to fast forty days and forty nights: *Cum jejunasset*, etc. What! A God who took an innocent and sinless flesh nevertheless subjects it to a fast so austere and so long; and I, a miserable sinner, who constantly feel the violence of my passions, and who ought to think only of satisfying divine justice for my past sins, shall I find it hard to submit to a practice so holy and so necessary to me? This example alone should certainly convince us. Nevertheless, since there is no precept more universally abused than that of fasting, I have decided to explain to you the obligation we have to fast in this season of Lent, and the manner we must observe in our fasts. The institution of the Lenten fast is holy in every respect: this I shall show you in the first point. Its practice must also be holy: this will be the matter of the second.

First Point

3. It has never surprised me that the authors of the so-called reformed religion should have declared themselves against these two articles of our belief, namely, against the necessity of confession and the observance of fasting. Those unhappy party leaders \[*cabezas de partido*\] knew very well that nothing humbles the soul more than the confession of sins, and nothing is harder on the body than fasting. And for that very reason, having formed the detestable design of separating from the Church, they did away with \[*dieron por el pie a*, knocked the feet out from under\] both precepts, so as more easily to find disciples to follow them. But it astonishes me, and must astonish every reasonable man, that after this they dared to call their sect a reformed religion. What rashness, or rather what absurdity! Would it not be a joke if the members of a very austere religious order, having grown lax and given up silence, poverty, mortification and obedience to live as they pleased, marry, have a good time \[*pasar buena vida*\], gamble and amuse themselves, wanted to be called the reformers of the order? Yet that is just what Luther, Calvin and the heads of the so-called reform have done. They preached licentiousness, declaimed against the celibacy of priests and against the vows of religious; they married scandalously, attacked the confession of sins, and tried to do away with works of penance. And after this they have the effrontery to call their sect a reformed Christianity. Can there be more ridiculous conduct? And must we not admit that if our Protestant friends \[*los señores Protestantes*\] reflected a little on this point, it alone would suffice to open their eyes and to keep them from following people who bear all the marks of those corrupt men from whom St. Paul bids us keep away, as persons who, far from serving Jesus Christ, are slaves of their sensuality and who with sweet and flattering words lead simple souls astray?[1]

4. To check the progress of heretics it is enough to know their pernicious errors, and Catholics, constant in the faith of their fathers, find no difficulty in opposing such novelties. Nevertheless, so that the poison of their talk may in no way creep into our practices, it will not be idle to show you the fault committed by those who refuse to obey this precept of the Church: *You shall fast when holy mother Church commands it.* I have noticed that the contempt that heretics and libertines show for Lent falls chiefly on three heads. First, on the obligation of the precept. It is not God, they say, who instituted this precept: it is a yoke that some men wished to impose on other men; why then should we submit to it? Second, on the distinction of foods. This abstinence, they go on, belongs rather to the old law than to the new, which is the law of grace and freedom. Third, on the fixing of the time. The number of forty days, they continue, looks more like a superstitious affectation than solid religion. This is what heresy and libertinism have been accustomed to object to the Lenten fast, and this is what we must answer.

5. The Lenten fast, says the heretic, is not of divine precept but of human. But, my beloved brethren, notice that God commands you to obey the men who impose this precept on you, for he wills that you submit to the Bishops and other Prelates who established it for the government of his Church. If a son of yours said to you: Father, you are a mere man, and so I am not obliged to obey you, would you not answer at once: True, my son, I am only a man; but God commands you to honour and obey me? The Church your mother tells you the same, my brethren: it is true that she is governed by men, but by men enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and it is these whom God commands us to obey. *If anyone,* says Jesus Christ, *will not hear the Church, let him be to you as a heathen and a publican.* Nor must you think that the Church ordered the Lenten fast in these latter times, or that the Popes or Bishops of our day made this ordinance. The Lenten fast, St. Jerome already said in his time, has come down to us by apostolic tradition: *Nos unam Quadragesimam secundum traditionem Apostolorum, toto anno, tempore nobis congruo jejunamus.*[2] The homilies of the Fathers for the season of Lent prove the same; and one has only to glance through them to see that the Christian Church has always kept a solemn fast before Easter in memory of the death of Jesus Christ. In this way she has fulfilled to the letter what the Saviour, speaking of his disciples, said to the Pharisees, who complained that they did not fast as they did: *Venient autem dies cum auferetur ab eis sponsus: et tunc jejunabunt,* They will fast when the bridegroom is taken from them. Nor was it a particular church or some diocese that made this law, for it was the decision of the whole Church. There is no country in the world, says St. Basil, where it has not been

proclaimed: *Nec ulla est insula, nec ulla est terra continens, non civitas, non gens ulla, non extremus mundi angulus, ubi non sit auditum jejunii edictum*. By what rule, then, shall we claim to dispense you from a fast so ancient and so universally received? *Revere*, this Father continues, *the grey hairs of the fast* \[*Reverere jejunii canitiem*\].

But why, you will say to me, abstain from certain foods in Lent, when Jesus Christ said that what goes into the mouth does not defile a man, and St. Paul that we may eat whatever is sold in the meat market?[3] The Church, beloved brethren, is persuaded that all foods are good, for she allows the use of all of them on ordinary days; and so the abstaining from meat in Lent, and from eggs and milk foods according to the customs of the dioceses, comes from a principle of mortification and penance, because these foods are more pleasing to the taste and more nourishing than the others.[4] This practice is quite in keeping with antiquity: Jesus Christ himself sanctions it by the praise he gave St. John the Baptist, who, to mortify himself, ate only locusts and wild honey. St. Paul says that it is good not to eat meat nor to drink wine: *Bonum est non manducare carnem, neque bibere vinum*.[5] And since the Apostle also says that one must abstain from a food whose eating scandalizes one's neighbour, ought not the heretics to stop scandalizing us by eating meat in the holy season of Lent?

Let us say a few words more \[*cuatro palabras*, four words\] about the number of days that they find fault with in our fasts. They accuse us of superstition on this point. Then let them accuse all the ancients who observed it; let them consequently take it ill that Moses kept forty days for his fast; let them likewise condemn, among the Prophets, Elijah, who kept the same form of fast; and, without respect for Jesus Christ, let them carry their insolence so far as to find fault with his conduct in this matter. After this example of a God-Man there is no need to look for further argument to justify our Lent. Let the holy Fathers by all means set themselves to find in Scripture what can make this number forty venerable and sacred; let them then note that, this number of days being the tenth part of the year, we pay God a kind of tithe with it;[6] and let them say, finally, that this restriction is no human invention but an express order of divine authority: nothing of this will confirm me so strongly in the practice of the Church as these words of the Gospel: *Cum jejunasset quadraginta diebus*. Jesus Christ my Saviour and my God fasted forty days: I try to fast them after him. Can I have greater consolation than to imitate him? Ah, blind heretics! See what a fine reform yours will be, when you try to destroy a penance whose use has been confirmed through so many centuries, authorized by all the Fathers and consecrated by Jesus Christ himself! And you, sensual Catholics, on what principles do you claim to dispense yourselves from so ancient a law? What! Shall the fear of weakening your health, a slight headache or stomach ache, or some other such small discomfort, make you break the fast without scruple in these great days, so venerable to the faithful in every age, and boldly violate this universal penance that the Church imposes on all her children? Look at the first Christians, and you will see them keep Lent with such rigour as ought to put our laxity to shame. A single meal at sunset was the only food they took in the whole day: some vegetables plainly cooked, a few herbs or roots, were almost all they took to sustain their emaciated bodies. Now that the Church has softened her first severity, and allows us to eat at midday and to take a light collation in the evening, what reason can there be for dispensing ourselves from the fast after this indulgence?[7] Let us fast, then, my brethren, since the Church, which has the right to command it, orders it. But how must we fast? This will be the matter of the second point.

Second Point

6. There are three principal dispositions that must accompany the Lenten fast. First, it must be accompanied by good works: *Sanctificate jejunium*, says the prophet Joel. Second, it must be accompanied by conversion and change of life: *Convertimini ad me in toto corde vestro*, says the Lord through the same Prophet. Third, it must serve as a preparation for the Easter communion. To fast, then, according to the spirit of the Church, we must:

7. Do other good works: join to fasting prayer, almsgiving, silence, recollection, attendance at the holy sacrifice of the Mass, frequent reception of the sacred bread of the word of God, the reading of good books, meditation on the holy mysteries. This is what you must do while the public penance the Church orders lasts. You complain that when you fast you cannot sleep; and you do not remember that you must spend more time in prayer, and implore God's mercy for the faults committed in the course of the year. Your fast must not be like the fast of the proud and the hypocrites, who look sad when they fast and have only the appearance and outside of penance: *Unge caput tuum, et faciem tuam lava*. Receive these days of salvation with joy, and be glad that the Church offers you so timely a means of satisfying the justice of God. Your fasts must not be like those of the misers. Give to the poor what you cut back from yourselves: *Impendamus virtuti quod subtrahimus voluptati*, St. Leo tells us; *Fiat refectio pauperis, abstinentia jejunantis*. Fast in such a way that you can say you have eaten in the person of the poor: *Sic jejuna, ut in alio manducante, te prandisse gaudeas*. Finally, your fasts must not be like those of the pleasure-lovers, the gluttons and the fastidious, who get ahead of the dinner hour; who make so long a meal that they have not the least need of another; who, by long sleep, recreations, idle visits, etc., spare themselves the pain of the fast. Our fasts, then, must be accompanied by good works that make us more humble, more mortified, more given to prayer, more charitable to the poor; in a word, more fervent in works of piety.

8. Our fasts must be accompanied by the conversion of our ways. The night of sin is past: *Nox praecessit*, St. Paul tells us.[1] These last days, which perhaps we gave to licentiousness and dissipation, have vanished; what is left to us of them but the shame of having spent them so? Let us put away, my brethren, let us put away those works of darkness: *Abjiciamus ergo opera tenebrarum*. Let us walk each day more in the purest and best-ordered paths: *Sicut in die honeste ambulemus*. What will it profit you to abstain from foods whose use is allowed at other times, and not to abstain from the use of sin, which is forbidden at all times? *Nonne hoc est magis jejunium, quod elegi? Dissolve colligationes impietatis*. The chief fast that God requires of us is that we cease to offend him: *Dissolve colligationes*, etc. We must, says St. Bernard, make everything that has led us to sin fast. *Jejunet gula*: Make your mouth fast. From today on let there be no more intemperance or excess. *Jejunet oculus*: Make your eyes fast. How many curious, profane and sinful glances have they not cast! All this must be cut back. How many times have you not looked with hatred and envy at that person you cannot stand \[*que no podéis ver*\]! Those vengeful eyes must be reformed and converted. *Jejunet auris*: You must make your ears fast, by not listening to the malicious and impious talk of so many libertines. *Jejunet lingua*: You must make that tongue fast which you have made serve backbiting and calumny. What good does it do you to abstain from the flesh of animals if you are tearing your brothers to pieces with your tongue, and, like those wretches of whom the Prophet speaks,[2] you approach your brothers only to devour and destroy them with your conversation? *Jejunet manus*: You must make your hands fast. You used them for impurity; make them serve you for mortification. They served injustice; let them now serve works of charity. Feed the hungry, give lodging to the pilgrim, clothe the naked. In short, make your soul fast more perfectly than your body, by withdrawing it from vice and evil inclinations: *Multo magis anima ipsa jejunet a vitiis, et a propria voluntate sua*. From this disposition I infer another, which is the third.

9. Namely, that the Lenten fast must serve you as a preparation for celebrating Easter well, by receiving the body of Jesus Christ worthily in the communion that the Church orders for all the faithful once they have reached the years of discretion. If by misfortune you find yourselves entangled in some sinful habit, begin from today to root it out. Seek a wise director for this. Do not leave your conversion to the end of Lent. Do not oblige the physician of your conscience to turn into a severe judge who condemns you instead of absolving you, and deprives you of the fruit of Easter when all your brethren have the happiness of sharing in it. Strive from now on to overcome that passion that tyrannizes you, and by holy recollection put yourselves in a state to keep the promise you make to your confessor. And forty days, beloved brethren, are not too long a space to prepare yourselves for the innocence that the adorable Sacrament you are to receive requires of you, above all when the wounds are old and inveterate and you have been negligent in going to confession.

10. Conclusion. Let us conclude with these moving words of today's Epistle: *Fratres, hortamur vos, ne in vacuum gratiam Dei recipiatis*.[3] I earnestly beg you with St. Paul, my brethren, not to receive in vain the grace that God offers you: make use of the time he gives you to sanctify yourselves: *Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile, ecce nunc dies salutis*. Christians, here are the days of salvation, the days of mercy, and perhaps you will never see them again. Let us take advantage, my brethren, of so favourable a time to appease the wrath of the Lord, which we have provoked; to chastise our body for our past iniquities; to return to the ways of justice from which we had strayed; to prepare ourselves for the grace of the resurrection; and to make ourselves worthy, walking along the hard paths of penance, to receive one day the reward promised to true penitents. This I wish you.

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[4] Source note: *Or. Eccl.* (a prayer of the Church).

[5] Rom. 16:17–18.

[6] Source note: Hier. epist.

[7] Source note: I Cor. 10:25 (given as 10:27).

[8] *lacticinios*.

[9] Source note: Rom. 14:21.

[10] Source note: Aug. epist. CXIX ad Januar. c. 15, et Leo Mag. serm. de Quadrag.

[11] *colación*.

[1] Source note: Rom. 13:12–13.

[2] Source note: Psalm 26(27):2.

[3] Source note: II Cor. 6:1–2, the Epistle of the First Sunday of Lent.