

Ash Wednesday (Catch Us the Little Foxes)

“Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return.”

1. The greatest feasts of the Church have periods of preparation placed before them (once upon a time the Church fasted on all the vigils of important solemn feasts). Christmas has the four weeks of Advent, and Easter has the 6 weeks of Lent. Easter is the greatest of our feasts, so it needs the greatest preparation. We can see this even in the Mass itself. Even though Christmas is not over but is extended in time and space through the Church... the continued Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery of Holy Week and Easter is actually re-presented daily in the Mass. Just as Mass requires some preparation like fasting, so too should the most glorious events of Our Lord's life that are re-presented in the Mass itself require some preparation. Lent is that preparation.
2. As a period of preparation for Easter and ultimately for heaven, the overall goal of Lent is to seek complete detachment from sin and all creatures of this world. Sin comes from seeking things of this world over God. Adam and Eve lost their focus on God in taking and eating the forbidden fruit. Attachments follow upon sin. Hence, the goal of Lent is not to see how much penance we can do (even though this can be done well for the salvation of souls), it is to seek complete detachment of the will and mortification of the understanding. These are what we strive for. St. Teresa of Jesus says, “there can never be solid virtue in a soul that is attached to its own will.” But how can we detach? We pray, we fast, and we give alms as the Gospel recommends... since we are body and soul... we do things with our body to help our souls.
3. Of these, fasting seems to be the characteristic penance of Lent... After all, Lent is 40 days long in imitation of Our Lord's fast in the desert. It should not be necessary to show the importance and advantages of fasting. The Sacred Scriptures, both the old and new Testaments, are filled with the praises of this holy practice. The traditions of every nation of the world testify to the universal veneration in which it has been held. It seems that there is not a people or a religion which is not impressed with this conviction—that man may appease his God by subjecting his body to penance.
4. St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom, St. Jerome, and St. Gregory the Great point out that the commandment put upon our first parents in the earthly

paradise was one of abstinence; and that it was by their not exercising this virtue, that they brought every kind of evil upon themselves and upon their children. Clearly, practicing fasting and abstinence is a very effective way of overcoming evils, of expiating sins, not only in our own life but in the world as a whole.

5. Doctors have shown that fasting regularly is healthy for the body because it helps to cleanse it of toxic materials. This is why fasting can be painful. This is true on the spiritual plane as well. Fasting helps cleanse the Mystical Body of sinful toxins. Venerable Mother Marianna of Quito left in her last testament these words: "Beloved daughters and sisters, I bequeath to you self-denial and holy penance. Oh! Do love penance! It is an antidote against evil passions and even healthy for the body." Armed with such motives, we should willingly seek to fast as all the saints have done before us. Let's not be gloomy or sad about this practice but joyful, knowing of its most healthful and salutary benefits.
6. St. John of the Cross says: "To come to enjoy what you have not, you must go by a way in which you enjoy not. To come to the possession you have not, you must go by a way in which you possess not. To come to be what you are not, you must go by a way in which you are not" (Ascent, Bk I, ch. 13.11). Lent is that we enjoy not, possess not and are not.
7. Although the Church only requires us to fast on this day and Good Friday, we should consider fasting some more, like on every Friday during Lent. Pope St. Celestine V before becoming Pope would practice several Lents through out the year. How edifying! Let's take that same generous spirit and apply it at least in some small way to our penances in Lent. Let's be generous in seeking to expiate our sins and those of the whole world...
8. One last thought. At Christmas we reflected on the trajectory of how God works with souls, as put on display in that mysterious book of the Scriptures, the *Canticle of Canticles*. Recall how we found in this book a repeated use of verbs having the first person pronoun as the their object or indirect object. Thus, the book starts out "Let him *kiss me* with the kiss of his mouth ..." A few verses later we hear: "*Draw me*: we will run after thee to the odour of thy ointments" (1:3). Again, a little later we hear this telling line: "*Shew me*, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest..." (1:6). *Kiss Me, Draw Me, Show Me.*

9. Since Christmas we have explored this trajectory a little more, adding on these phrases... *bring me into the wine cellar and put charity in order in me*. And, *"Stay me up with flowers, compass me about with apples: because I languish with love"* (2:5). Today, let's add a few more that are very relevant to the season of Lent: *"His left hand is under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me"* (2:6), and *"Behold my beloved speaketh to me: Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come"* (2:10), and *"shew me thy face, let thy voice sound in my ears: for thy voice is sweet, and thy face comely"* (2:14). *Embrace me, speak to me, show me thy Face...* When we enter Lent with some seriousness, such things start to be fulfilled. But we must add one more phrase, namely... *"Catch us the little foxes that destroy the vines: for our vineyard hath flourished"* (2:15). Catch us... catch in me... the little foxes that block this loving union! Here is the purpose of Lent summarized! We are offered a deeper union with His Majesty... but only if we go out in the desert and catch the little foxes inside our souls that diminish and destroy our virtues... and prevent divine union.