Carême 1 2014

“Voici maintenant le temps favorable” (2Cor 6: 2)

We begin now in earnest the Great Lent, the annual period of Forty Days dedicated to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In the early church, the period was set at six weeks in the West—which, after subtracting the number of Sundays (on which fasting is always forbidden), yields the number of 36 days. St. Ambrose says that in observing Lent, we render to God a tenth (a tithe) of the year. The Church in the Middle Ages, wishing to observe exactly the number of 40 days hallowed by Our Lord, added four days, which is why Lent now begins in the middle of the week (Ash Wednesday).  
 How shall we conduct ourselves during this Holy Season? Saint Paul once again provides us with a formidable regime: “par une grande constance, dans les tribulations, dans les nécessités, dans les détresses…dans les travaux, les veilles, les jeûnes.” While we must always have a spirit of penance, most especially must we exercise ourselves in prayer, fasting, and works of charity during Lent.

In the first place, prayer. Every Christian is bound in justice to spend some time in prayer every day. If we have been neglectful of even the most basic daily prayers, let us confess this sin, and resolve right now, today, to follow a simple rule of prayer. For example, a short morning offering; the Angelus at noon; one decade of the Rosary in evening, together with a short examination of conscience. This simple rule of prayer is possible for everyone: man, woman, and child. This humble beginning of the life of prayer, if followed with generosity and discipline, will yield abundant fruit, and is the foundation of all other forms of penance—without which all our works remain empty and barren.

In the second place, fasting. Nothing is more at odds with the spirit of this world than voluntary fasting. Those quick to despise Muslims might ask themselves, “Do I observe Lent as faithfully as Muslims do Ramadan?” They neither eat nor drink before sundown—following in this the ancient Christian practice, itself a tradition received from the Jews. Those wishing to learn more might read with profit the commentary of the great Dom Prosper Gueranger in his *Liturgical Year*.

And finally, “almsgiving,” by which is signified all the works of charity. In the words of Saint Paul: “par la pureté, par la science, par la longanimité, par la bonté, par l’Esprit-Saint, par une charité sincère.” A penniless child can offer the alms of a pure conscience; a learned man can offer the alms of his time to instruct the ignorant; a mother burdened with many cares can offer the alms of patient longanimité; each one has something precious to offer.

In whatever penitential practices we assume for the Season, let us remember—as the Holy Father loves to remind us—the hallmark of the Christian is *joy*. Let us begin our Lent, then, mindful of the Gift of Jesus Christ—His perfect Self-Gift to the Father—and count ourselves truly blessed to be able to suffer something for His sake: “comme attristés, nous qui sommes toujours joyeux.”