Matthew 4:4

A Discourse for the 1st Sunday of Lent.

On Fasting and Abstinence.

Non in solo pane vivit homo.
Man liveth not by bread only S° Matt. Chap 4 & V: 4

Among the humiliating necessities of man in this Vale of Tears, one of the most principal is that of eating and drinking. For what is more base and abject than to be obliged to search for a corruptible nouriture[1] in the entrails of the earth, from the depths of the waters, and by depriving different species of Animals of Life? But how astonishing it is that this necessity which abases us so much and places us as it were, in the rank of Beasts, is become among sensual men and even but too often among those who make profession of a spiritual life, the object of their pleasures, and of their most earnest desires. What then! must that which ought to cause Christians to humble themselves and

[1 “nouriture” – (Anglo-Nor., Mid. Fr., Lat.) Nourishment, food, diet.]

lament their necessities, serve them as an allurement to sin be almost their only occupation and study? Oh sad and deplorable condition! If it was necessary for God to set bounds to this inordinate appetite and for the Church to exert her authority, to prevent man from becoming a slave to his Belly. Fasting and abstinence are the Curb that must be used to restrain this brutal passion, they are the mound to stop this impetuous torrent. This I propose for to day’s entertainment. In the first part I mean to shew you what regards the precept of Fasting and abstinence. And in the 2nd various motives which ought to engage us to observe it.

Abstinence and fasting are the deprivation of Foods. By abstinence considered in itself we understand, the abstaining from flesh meat and those things that appertain thereunto. It is unnecessary to enter into any further explanation on this head as I am persuaded you know both the meaning of abstinence and the times when it is to be obser[v]ed.

Hence I shall confine myself chiefly to the other subject viz: that of fasting, which is more easily misunderstood, as a man is so prone to listen to the dictates of corrupt nature which teaches him so to mitigate it as almost if not wholly to destroy it.
To come then to the Point, there are two different kinds of Fasts. The one is called the natural fast which consists in taking nothing at all, either by way of food or medicine or any other way. This fast is required in all who approach to the holy Eucharist unless when it is received by way of Viaticum. The other is called the Ecclesiastical Fast and is that of which I am speaking. This consists in making but one meal a day of such meats as are permitted and that not till about midday and a collation at night. This is a fast which the Church obliges all her children to observe under pain of mortal sin on certain days, which are all Lent, the Sundays excepted,

[2 "Viaticum" – (Lat.) Holy Communion given to those in danger of death.]
[3 "collation" – (Old Fr., Lat.) A light repast allowed on fast days. See Archer’s definition below.]

The Ember days and certain Vigils, I say under mortal Sin for every transgression, that is to say, every day that they omit it unless they have lawful reasons to dispense them therein. This cannot be called in question. The law is clear. The Church has received this power and authority from God himself. This no Catholic can dispute. The question now is in what manner we are to fulfill this obligation, & who are exempt therefrom. We have already observed that the Ecclesiastical fast consists in making but one meal a day of such meats as are permitted and this ought to be of maiger food unless the Church for reasons known to her dispenses herein. Thus you are permitted this Lent to eat flesh meat on certain days. This meal ought not to be made till about midday and if you should make it a considerable time before, you would not satisfy the precept. Besides this meal the Church tolerates a collation or small refection at night, in which regard must be had both as to the quantity and quality of the food. As to the quantity one cannot lay down any fixt rule. Attention must be had to age, constitution and occupations: However the best is to consider not how much may be allowed as to how little will suffice. As to the quality, we are not to use fish, eggs, cheese, butter or milk. There might be made some allowance to some poor people who would have nothing but water to their Bread, for this they should apply to their Pastors as likewise in all other doubts and difficulties. Besides this a bit of bread and a cup of tea or such like is tolerated in the morning.

[4 “maiger” or “maigre” – (Mid. Fr.-Fr.; R. C. Church) Food prepared without meat; of fasting or a fast day when animal flesh is not permitted to be eaten (“maigre days”); meager.]

Let us now examine the excuses which people allege to dispense them from fasting; And endeavor to distinguish the good and lawful ones from them that are false and insufficient. I remark four principal ones which are age, infirmity, poverty, and Labour. The first excuse which is alleged against the law of fasting is Age, that persons are either to young or to much advanced
in years. As to young people the Theologians agree that they are not ordinarily obliged to fast before they

have attained to the age of 21. I say ordinarily, for the same Doctors teach that young persons ought to exercise themselves more or less according to their strength, for example one or two days a week in order to accustom themselves by degrees to the practice of it, without however, obliging them to it under mortal sin: They add however that if a young person be addicted to gluttony or impurity and that fasting be absolutely necessary to overcome it, he is then strictly obliged thereunto, because the most efficacious means ought to be employed for his conversion; his salvation being above everything else\. As to people advanced in age, the Casuists do not decide anything positively, so that this ought to be established as a Maxim, that they are obliged thereunto as long as their strength will permit them the practice of it.

The second excuse alleged to excuse them from fasting is infirmity. A very lawful excuse when sickness or infirmity are such that they cannot observe the law of fasting without considerable detriment to their health. A sick person who should fast through obstinacy and thereby put himself in danger of death or of being a long time ill, far from doing a work agreeable to God would render himself guilty of a considerable fault. But there are people who do quite the reverse to the Pharisees mentioned in the holy Gospel, who fasted that they might appear pale and disfigured, these are glad to appear so that they may be looked upon as unable to fast, they pretend to be ill when they are well. There are some, it is true, that find some incommmodity from fasting but it is so light as to be insufficient to exempt them from it. Sometimes their complain [complaint] is of such a nature, that fasting is the best remedy for it. D' Brethren, how many people will there not be condemned at the Tribunal of the Divine justice for having dispised this law of God and ordinance of his Church! They may deceive themselves and impose upon man but they cannot impose upon an omnicient God.

The third excuse against the law of fasting is poverty. If a poor person hath not wherewith to make a sufficient meal at the hour prescribed for the observation of fasting nor food capable of supporting him

\[ Miswriting/illegible; perhaps also, “home.”\]
Finally, the 4th reason brought against the Law of fasting is labour, upon which head we ought to distinguish two sorts of work and two sorts of constitutions. A work may be incompatible with fasting in a weak person and not so in a strong one. There are hard labours and those that are not so. This supposed I say with the Casuists, that the general rule is, that when work is incompatible with fasting that is when a person cannot do his work and fast, whether it be because the work is very hard or that the person is of a weakly constitution, there is a lawful excuse. But if on the contrary the work be not incompatible with the fasting either because the work is not very hard, or because the person is very strong and healthy, then he is by no means exempt from the obligation of fasting. And thus every one ought to render justice to himself, to act nevertheless with prudence & discretion, not to flatter themselves through delicacy nor to exhaust themselves through vain scruple. We must reason in the same manner with regard to travelers so that if the journey that is made whether on foot or on horseback be incompatible with fasting, having regard to the persons constitution and strength, he is not obliged to the observance of it. But on the contrary, if he is able to perform the journey fasting without any considerable prejudice to his health, he is bound to observe it. Seek not Dr Christian specious pretexts of exemption which will not avail you at the judgment seat of Christ: Those who are of a good will easily find means of fulfilling this duty as well as others. But to engage you Christians, to observe the fast as far as you are able, I will propose to you some very pressing motives. The subject of my second part.

The great advantages which are reaped from fasting and abstinence are very powerful motives to engage us to practice them. They are Temporal and corporal, spiritual and eternal. I say in the first place that fasting and Abstinence procure man very considerable temporal advantages. As there is nothing that occasions more sickness and infirmities and causes the death of more people than gluttony and drunkenness, so there is nothing that contributes more to health and to the prolongation of life than temperance and sobriety. Experience excludes all doubt. And the reason is very obvious, for if too great a quantity of food only serves to produce a great abundance of bad humours, which cause sickness and oftentimes death; a regular, sober, and moderate life, maintains that equal balance in the constitution which gives health and strength to the body. Physicians have not oftentimes more efficacious remedies to cure the most desperate sickness than regimen. Fasting and Abstinence are moreover a great resource in poverty and mediocrity. How much do not those who live with frugality spare, whilst the Glutton and Drunkard squandering the greatest riches, & reduce their families to mere beggary. But this frugality ought not to be the principal end of your fasting, sordid avarice may have place there. Your principal
intention in fasting should be the glory of God and the sanctification of your Souls. However the Poor may profit of what they save by abstinence, to serve them in their future wants, and the Rich ought to employ what they save thereby in alms, as S'I Leo remarks.

There is a much greater advantage which St. Athanasius speaks of regarding the Spiritual life. Fasting puts wicked Spirits to flight[,] it delivers [banishes] bad thoughts, it renders the understanding [mind] susceptible of the lights of Heaven, it purifies the heart and sanctifies the whole man. There is no exaggeration hear D'I Christians. For as Gluttony sets man at a great distance from God, attaches him to the earth and foments his passions; fasting on the contrary, sobriety and Abstinence bring him near to his Creator, detaches him from earthly and carnal things, render him wholly spiritual, abate the ardour of his Passions and bring him to the practice of all kinds of Virtues. It follows of consequence that nothing is more conducive to the Sinner, conversion and nothing more conducive to the perseverance of the just in virtues. This cause[d] S'I Ambrose to say, that Fasting is the noriture of the Soul, the Life of Celestial Spirits, the grave of Luxury, the death of all vices, the remedy of salvation, the Sourse [Source] of Grace, and the strongest support of Chastity. What [is] more magnificent than this Elogium?[6] What prodigies hath not fasting wrought in the spiritual State. Is it not

[6 “Elogium” – Variate form of “eulogium”; eulogy.]
for he says that he did eat ashes as bread, and mingled his drink with weeping. And that he became so weakened by his great austerities, that his bones cleaved to his Skin. Jesus Christ the Saviour of the World, would, would [word duplicated] begin his Mission, and prepare himself for the great work of our Redemption by a most rigorous fast of 40 days, the memory of which we honor at this holy time. If[t] was to set the Example to his Church. And thus she instituted Lent, being willing in some manner to imitate her divine Spouse. He hath also in his Gospel, order[ed] this pious exercise and hath prescribed the method and conditions of it. The lives of the Apostles were one continued series of Fasting, Abstinence, & mortification. In a word, all the true Servants Disciples of Jesus Christ, all the true Servants of God, have been sober and temperate; have practised fasting and mortification according to their strength. You see then D Christian Brethren, with what cheerfulness and ardour you ought to observe the Fast and abstinence commanded by the Church. Every thing there engages you thereunto[.] The example of our Saviour and of all the Saints both of the old and New Testament; The Command of God, the Laws of the Church, and your own Interest. What moreover ought still to excite you cheerfully to embrace this holy exercise is the easiness of it with the considerable mitigations which the [she] tolerates. What a difference between the fasts at present and those of the Primitive Church? In the first ages of Christianity, during Lent, people eat but once a day and that not till towards night; their food was fruit, herbs and roots, excepting those of a weak constitution, [who] were allowed some small fishes, but the larger were forbidden them. Those who could not observe the fast dared not to go out of their houses lest they should scandalize their Brethren. But at present how easy is the observation of Lent. It is permitted to take our meal about Midday and to eat all sorts of maigre food, very few at least on certain days excepted. The Church tolerates a Collation at night, more or less according as particulars stand in need, moreover as I mentioned before some little [food] is also tolerated in the morning. With these mitigations are not those Christians who transgress so easy a law without great reasons extremely culpable.

Finally the 3rd motive to engage as to the observance of fasting is the third advantage that reaped from it, and which is infinitely above all others, this is the eternal reward that fasting & abstinence procure us. It is by fasting that the gate of Heaven will be opened to us, in the same manner as by gluttony it is was shut against us. Fasting will merit for us this favor.

As a recompense of fasting, abstinence and mortification[,] the Saints will be replenished and as it were inundated with torrents of delight, according to the holy Text, with inconceivable delight, and at the same time most pure and holy. Ah! D Christian, who will not resolve to practice some light mortifications in this life which is so short to be replenished for all Eternity with the
delights [Joys] of Heaven? Who on the contrary will determine to satisfy for a few moments, the brutal passion of Gluttony and sensuality, to suffer forever in Hell an enraged hungar and burning thirst? Yes I resolve from this moment not to be a slave to my Belly, not to let a base passion domineer over me, but to live with temperance and frugality, to mortify my flesh, to tame my Body by fasting and abstinence.

Behold D’ Christians now is the acceptable time[,] now is the day of Salvation. These are the words of the Great Apostle. Let us enter into the intention of the Church our good Mother. She hath instituted Lent for many ends and the same we ought to propose to ourselves. 1st to honour the 40 days fast of our Divine Saviour. In the second place she instituted in order to dispose her children for the great solemnity of Easter and for the annual Communion, which she has commanded at that time. Now this preparation consists in the principal things, which are to purify our consciences by a sincere penance, & to adorn our

Souls with Christian virtues. This is also the acceptable time in which we ought to undertake the Spiritual cure of Sinners & the change of their Life; they ought with great eagerness to present themselves for that purpose. They must then now begin to prepare themselves to make a good Confession, make a serious examen\footnote{“examen” – (Anglo-Nor., Mid. Fr., Lat.) An examination, judgment, analysis, inquiry, appraisal; a review or weighing of one’s past behavior, thoughts, sins, etc. In the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), “examen of conscience.”} of their Conscience, they must abandon Sin, break off from all criminal habits, quit the immediate occasions of sin, reconcile themselves with their enemies, restore the goods of their Neighbour, repara his honor and reputation if they have hurt or taken them away, be instructed in the truths of Religion and the duties of their state if they are ignorant of them; practice the duties suitable to their State of life, and the works of mercy corporal and spiritual.

This is what is called observing the Spiritual fast without which the corporal fast will avail nothing unto eternal life. Will you [d[...]] d[...]'re you desirous] saith S’ Bernard that your fast should be agreeable to the Lord?\footnote{Archer’s intention here is unclear. Perhaps intended: “Are you desirous saith S’ Bernard that your fast should be agreeable to the Lord?” The original sentence and interlineations have been transcribed as written.} It must be universal, that is[,] it must extend over the Soul as well as the Body, over all the Passion, over all the senses interior and exterior. You make your mouth and Stomach fast, let your eyes fast also that they look not on any dangerous object. Let your tongue fast by not uttering any bad |sinful and idle| words. Let your ears fast, by not hearkening to detraction & obscene and dangerous discourse. Let your hands fast by not doing any works of iniquity. Let your imagination, your mind and heart fast by retrenching\footnote{“retrench(ing)” – (Mid. Fr.- Fr.) To reduce, diminish, or lessen; to restrain or repress, to bar.] from them every evil thought, desire and object and replenishing them with all good things. For

\[16\]
if you fast and continue on in your sins to commit sin, you observe the fast of the Devil who never eats, yet is not the less evil. What joy, what consolation for you my Breth. if at the feast of the Resurrection of our Lord you have the happiness to find yourselves in the State of a perfect spiritual resurrection, which may God in his infinite mercy grant. In the Name &c. [etc.]