

LIFE OF THE SPIRIT
 A LENTEN SERMON

BY
 ST AUGUSTINE

(*Sermo cxliii, Migne Appendix*)



THE whole course of our life should be looked upon as a race, a race in which we must exert our utmost power to win the heavenly prize. More especially this should be our concern during the forty days devoted to abstinence; for as much as we keep our bodily appetites and passions under subjection, so much more will our spiritual forces be strengthened. We have high authority for this custom practised by so many of the prophets and saints. Moses fasted forty days and nights when he received the law from God (*Exod.* 34, 28). Elias also fasted for the same period before his translation from this world (1 *Kings* 19, 8). And greater than all prophets and saints, our Lord and Saviour himself; after such a fast, overcame all the temptations of the Evil One; and so, as a conquerer, entered upon his public ministry.¹

With such examples before us, surely we must observe this season, observe it keenly and gladly, resisting and remaining unmoved by all bodily allurements. For it is chiefly during these days given up to the will of God, when the senses held under rigid control are quiet and subdued—it is then that the spirit expands and grows more ardent. Then, man's whole being made lighter, and no longer weighed down by sensual gratifications, hastens towards God and his sure rewards. Remember our Saviour's² words: 'And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness and cares of this life'.

But while during this season it is of great profit to abstain from things allowed at other times of the year, it is of far greater importance to avoid such things which are never at any time allowed. And if during these forty days we give up the food permitted on other days, much more must we turn away from those evil passions and desires which are never permitted—not even for a single day.

If we wish our fast to be acceptable before all things we must fast from our besetting sins and failings. Shall the pallor that follows your fasting excuse the livid flush of envy and anger? Of what use to drink no wine, and yet be inflamed with the poison of hatred? To be so scrupulous over the flesh of creatures, and yet wound your fellow men with cruel slanders? How useless to abstain from things usually

¹ 'ut ad praedicationem Evangelii jam victor accederet'. cf. 'ad rem publicam accessi'. *Cic. Pro Roscio Am.*

² 'Salvator'. Augustine was one of the first few—including Jerome and Prudentius—to use this new (or was it a revived?) word.

allowed, whilst we indulge in things never on any account permitted. God loves and honours those who obey him; and so, once again: whilst we keep this fast, much more must we banish all our base desires and evil deeds—then we shall share in the nature of the saints, and in the life to come be found worthy of their reward; for as it is written: 'Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled'.

Here is another thought: we should gladly arrange that the value of the things we give up be distributed to the sick and poor; for blessed are they who willingly suffer hunger that others may be satisfied. A gift is pleasing to God when it helps the poor, when it makes for peace and cancels old quarrels. Then he will be indeed pleased if our self-denial helps those who are compelled by necessity to practise abstinence. Then we shall deserve to hear our Lord saying: 'Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done this unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto me'. What condescension is here! How loving is our Lord, who in order entirely to destroy our avarice, actually accepts for himself what we give to the very poorest of his followers.

Finally, my friends, may God in his mercy grant you so to please him by your abstinence and generosity that he will at last lead you to that eternal, that real life where he lives and reigns for ever.

Translated by JOHN SEARLE.



CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor, 'LIFE OF THE SPIRIT'.

'NO PLASTER SAINT'

Sir,—In your January number Father Netherway, reviewing *No Plaster Saint*, says the play shows that St Thérèse of Lisieux, towards the end of her life, was troubled by the memory of 'her father, deserted by his children' and 'helpless and lonely'. If the play does show this, it also shows that its author has not made good use of the 'primary sources and documents' which Father Netherway says he has consulted.

The facts about M. Martin (St Thérèse's father) are these: he was taken to the Hospital of the Bon Sauveur at Caen in February, 1889. It was no longer safe to keep him at home. He suffered from hallucinations. Once he vanished from home for four days and no one knew where he was. Two of his daughters, Léonie and Céline, went with him to Caen and stayed in the town until June of that year and saw him continually. Then the hospital enforced the rule that patients could only have one visit a week. So the two girls returned to Lisieux and lived with their aunt and uncle, Madame and M.