

Præsta, Dómine, fidélibus tuis: ut jejuniórum veneránda solémnia, et cóngrua pietáte suscípíant, et secúra devotióne percúrrant.

Dearly beloved,

As we begin this most holy season of Lent, there is perhaps no better way to shape our understanding of the season and what God and the Church ask of us than to prayerfully consider the Collect for today's Mass. It is a perfect example of a Roman prayer: short, solemn, and rich in theological content. It says: 'Grant, O Lord, unto thy faithful people, that they may both piously undertake the venerable solemnities of the Fast, and persevere in the same with unfailling devotion.'

There are three things of note in the prayer: first, it is addressed to the Lord. This may seem obvious, but it is easy to enter into Lent thinking it is about what we will do rather than what God will do in us. Lent is not a studied exercise in Pelagianism where we perform amazing feats of strength while God looks on and applauds. It is rather a time when we allow Him to work in us to full capacity; a season in which we focus our energies to be more open to Him so that He can act in us as He always would if only we would let Him.

This means that the best thing we can do, in our fasting, our prayer, and our works of mercy, is first ask the Lord to give us strength and grace to accomplish the things we have chosen to do for His glory and our forgiveness. Lent should teach us to rely more profoundly on the Lord, and this is best achieved by constant prayer, especially when the things we have committed to become difficult to achieve: when it seems we cannot go fasting even one moment more, when longer prayer seems impossible to bring to fruition, when life overwhelms us such that spiritual and corporal works of mercy are too much. In those moments we should pray, and then follow through on the thing we have set out to do, and then when we do it in our weakness, we will know that the Lord did it in us, and we will have no reason for pride, but only for gratitude.

The second point of the collect is that the word for fasting is in the plural, literally fastings. It could be translated by the singular word Fast, but only insofar as it indicates the collective of forty days of fasting. With the current legislation, there are only two days of fasting, but that is not what the prayers of the extraordinary form say. If we frequent this form of the Mass, we should take to heart the insistence of the liturgy in mentioning fasting in the plural: the true penitential and transformative character of fasting is only experienced by a prolonged effort—day after day after day in which we must rely upon the Lord's strength and patience to make it through each hour of fasting. It is hard; it is long; it is humiliating. But this is precisely the point; the more we engage in this kind of penance, the more we will rejoice at Easter; the more we will have shared in the merits of Christ, the Prophets and the Saints who have fasted in times past; the more we do a penance that truly matches our sins.

The final point of the collect is parallelism at the end: it says, may we undertake Lent with fitting piety and secure devotion. The phrase 'congrua pietate' means that this is an exercise of worship; it is not just something we do because it does us good, but something we owe to God. St. Gregory the Great calls Lent our tithe of the rest of the entire year; these forty days make up for our negligence the other 325 days. But if we don't do anything appropriate for a real tithe, this season is a waste. We will have been given a day of salvation, a time for penance, and chosen to sleep instead. We may not be able to give God all that we want during the rest of the year, so this season must be different; it must involve real sacrifices, real changes in our routine, real commitments to prayer. And this means we must retire from the world, even from legitimate socializing. There will always be time for parties; but there is not always time for doing penance. Penance should be our priority until Easter comes.

'Secura devotio' is the other side of the fitting piety: we engage in our penance with secure devotion, the kind of devotion that comes from true love, secure because it knows that no one is more worth sacrificing for than Our Savior. Devotion to a human being can be spurned by the other person, or ignored or laughed at, but

devotion to the Lord is infallibly good and life-giving, and the more secure we are in it, the more happy we will be. Lent is a time for training ourselves to be unshakeable in our love for God, and to prove it by our actions.

As we engage in this holy contest, the battle against the demons and against our self-love and pride, may we invoke the holy deacon, St. Ephrem the Syrian, and pray as he once did.

O Lord, God of souls and bodies, You know the extreme frailty of my soul and my flesh. Grant me strength in my weakness, O Lord, and sustain me in my misery. Give me a grateful soul that I may never cease to recall Your benefits, O Lord most bountiful. Be not mindful of my many sins, but forgive me all my misdeeds. O Lord, disdain not my prayer - the prayer of a wretched sinner; sustain me with Your grace until the end, that it may protect me as in the past. It is Your grace which has taught me wisdom; blessed are they who follow her ways, for they shall receive the crown of glory. In spite of my unworthiness, I praise You and I glorify You, O Lord, for Your mercy to me is without limit. You have been my help and my protection. May the name of Your majesty be praised forever.

May God grant to each of us a blessed Lent, that we may please Him by our efforts to do penance, relying on His power alone, that we may reach the eternal Easter feast in the world to come and rejoice there forever.