

Selected Sermons

St. Augustine of Hippo

translated by Edmond Bonin

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Contents

Sermon 11: <i>The Birth of Christ</i>	5
Sermon 18: <i>On the Birth of Jesus</i>	9
Sermon 21: <i>First Sermon for Easter</i>	13
Sermon 30: <i>Tenth Sermon for Easter</i>	17
Sermon 38: <i>Third Sermon for the Easter Season</i>	21
Sermon 40: <i>On the Ascension of the Lord</i>	25
Sermon 41: <i>On the Ascension of the Lord</i>	29
Sermon 3: <i>On Deferring Conversion</i>	33
Sermon 4: <i>The Two Roads</i>	39
Sermon 20: <i>On Confessing Our Sins</i>	43
Sermon 21: <i>On Loving and Serving God</i>	51
Sermon 28: <i>God Is All to All</i>	63
Sermon 34: <i>A Prayer to the Holy Spirit</i>	69
Sermon 46: <i>Zacchaeus</i>	75
Sermon 48: <i>On Judging Oneself</i>	79
Sermon 65: <i>On Doing Penance for Our Sins</i>	85
Sermon 66: <i>On Fasting</i>	89
Sermon 67: <i>On Fasting</i>	93

Sermon 70: <i>Of Yokes and Burdens</i>	97
Sermon 161: <i>Sins of the Flesh</i>	101
Sermon 162: <i>Sinning in One's Body</i>	113
Sermon 163: <i>The New Temple, The New Life</i>	121
<i>On Unceasing Prayer</i>	133

Sermon II

The Birth of Christ

§1 My dear brothers, the birth of Jesus Christ means redemption for sinners. In fact, if the Savior hadn't come in the form of a slave, they could never have been set free. This is the day of the Lord's birth, so let slaves rejoice. It's the birth of the Redeemer, so let captives rejoice in their freedom. It's the birth of the Physician, so let the sick rejoice. It's the birth of Mercy, so let sinners rejoice. It's the birth of Christ Jesus, so let all Christians acclaim him.

God, who had measured out time, willed to be born within time. St. Paul says: "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men."¹ You understand, of course, that he emptied himself, but didn't lose the divine nature and was never separated from it. He became man, yet never ceased being God. He vested himself in our humanity without divesting himself of his divinity. Though he became man by taking on a human form, he didn't lose his divine form. He donned a garment of flesh, but inwardly always remained God.

As God and Creator, "by whom all was made, and without whom nothing was made," he built for himself the very temple in which he'd be born—creating his mother, while remaining eternally with his Father. To clothe himself in our humanity, he was born of a mother whom he himself had formed as he reigned with his Father. That's what the

¹ Ph 2:7

prophet meant when he wrote: “Of Zion it shall be said, ‘This one and that one were born in it,’ for the Most High himself will establish it.”²

Let the heavens thrill, and earth exult: the heavens because there’s no one to accuse them, and earth because it has sprouted its Savior. Who’ll discover the secret of so precious a gift? Referring to that secret, Paul wasn’t afraid to say that it’d been “hidden for ages and generations.”³

§2 Irrevocably attached to her virginity, the mother of our Savior asked the angel Gabriel how she could possibly conceive without violating her chastity in any way: “How can this be, since I have no husband?⁴ The prophets teach that a virgin will conceive and bear a son, but I’ve no idea how that could be. Please, blessed Gabriel, messenger of God, please explain to this chaste virgin the secret of such a great mystery. You greeted me in a manner unheard of till now; so please tell me more in order to console my virginity, for I’ve vowed it to God and have bound myself to serve him in his temple. Your message is an extremely serious matter. Tell me how this would be done, since I don’t have a husband, and never will.”

Gabriel replied, “You won’t ‘know man,’ but you *will* know a mystery, for the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And so the child to be born will be holy and will be called the Son of God.”⁵

My brothers, try to visualize the scene: Gabriel apprised of the mystery, and Mary begging him to explain it.

“O Mary,” he continued, “listen to how this will come about. Your virginity and your sense of propriety won’t suffer in any way. Simply believe the truth, and rest assured. Because your faith is perfect, your virginity will remain intact. As I said before, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. Because you’ll conceive through faith and trust, you’ll be

² Ps 87:5 ³ Col 1:26 ⁴ Lk 1:34 ⁵ Lk 1:35

mysteriously fruitful. That's why the Holy One to be born of you will be called the Son of God. And just as his arrival in you will be imperceptible, so too will be his coming forth. Could God possibly be a burden?"

Mary replied: "If it's as you say, I joyfully bow before your angelic voice. Refusing to believe would be an affront to him who sent you, and he could strike me dumb, as he did Zechariah."

Then Gabriel added: "O virgin, don't be unbelieving, but believing. As I said, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. You won't experience the ardors of concupiscence, because everything here defies the ordinary rules of mortality and, instead, mirrors the characteristics of the most perfect holiness."

Mary therefore said, "Provided God, in bestowing motherhood upon me, also safeguards my virginity, here I am—the servant of the Lord. Be it done to me as you've said."⁶

Oh, how happy is Mary that she believed! Through faith she conceived and carried in her womb him whom the entire world can't contain, and she formed him from her own flesh and blood. For those who believe, redemption sprouted from virginity.

§3 O blessed Mary, how did you merit to become the mother of our Savior? What extraordinary privilege drew your Creator to you? Why such a tremendous favor? You're a virgin, you're holy, you made a vow. It's from him that you received what you vowed, and yet how very great is he to whom you gave birth!

Rejoice, O sacred virginity! Rejoice for being thus protected by the message of an angel! Your chastity, O Mary, was preserved in all its integrity, and you really and truly became the mother of our Savior. Your childbearing was celebrated by the entire army of angels, by all the heavenly host. And soon, one of those angels would announce the

⁶ Lk 1:38

good news of our Savior's birth to the shepherds keeping watch in the fields. "Blessed are those servants whom their master finds awake when he comes."⁷

Christ Jesus came in order to feed the hungry, free the captives, give sight to the blind, and bring the dead back to life. May he transform the children of wrath into vessels of mercy,⁸ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life and, together with the angels, exult in the birth of our Savior.

⁷ Lk 12:37 ⁸ Rm 9:23

Sermon 18

On the Birth of Jesus

§1 My dear brothers, thanks be to the Lord our God that I needn't explain to you just how solemn today's feast is, since your devotion has anticipated our teaching.

Concerning the mysteries we're commemorating, the prophets and the Gospels have joined forces to remind us of what the law has already taught us. May you, therefore, by the grace of God, always conform your deeds to the reading of Scripture, as you're doing today. And may your conduct always attain the holiness which the commandments prescribe.

Our Savior is born to us today, so let's thrill with joy. How could we possibly be sad when beholding the source of all joy? Indeed, we should all be happy, since Jesus Christ was born for all of us. Let no one imagine he's excluded from this happiness. The just should rejoice because they'll receive their reward; sinners, too, should rejoice because they're being given an opportunity for forgiveness; even pagans should rejoice because they're being offered salvation.

It's for our sake that the Word of God has donned our humanity. We're in him by the very fact that we refuse to separate ourselves from him. So, then, let's acknowledge our redemption, our salvation. We'd be cutting ourselves off from Christ Jesus if we refused to belong to his body.

But, my brothers, since the Sacred Scriptures abundantly celebrate Christ's birth, let's study them and see how the Creator of the ages was born in the fullness of time. "For the Lord commanded, and everything was made; he spoke, and all was created."¹

§2 So, my brothers, we believe that Christ Jesus is at one and the same time both God and man—God consubstantial with the Father, and man fashioned by his mother; God by his very nature, and man by donning flesh; God before all ages, and man within time; God before the beginning of things, and man in the course of things.

He who, in the beginning, created all things by his omnipotence, comes today in order to save us by his flesh. Creation was the first miracle of his omnipotence; redemption was the second prodigy of his love. Moved by his infinite tenderness, God willed that his mercy should restore what sin had stolen from us. So the Word descended to make us ascend; he tilted the heavens to elevate the earth; he partook of human nature to have us partake of the divine nature—for, as St. Paul writes, "[He was] born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption."²

Let no one, however, take offense on hearing that a woman became the mother of God. Being a virgin, she conceived by the intervention of the Holy Spirit, and the title *woman* is due solely to her sex. The evangelist whom we read earlier calls her a virgin, and the Apostle calls her a woman, in order to highlight the omnipotence which presided over her virginal conception without altering her condition as woman.

§3 Our Savior, then, was born of flesh, but not of fleshly corruption; he was born a man, but not begotten by a man; he took on our flesh, but in such a manner as to safeguard the honor of his majesty. Thus, while protecting the purity of his birth from the least taint of human contamination, he fully submitted to the conditions of human nature

¹ Ps 148:5–6 ² Ga 4:4–5

without detracting in any way from the dignity of God. He passed through this world just as he'd arrived at birth—preserving his purity by the innocence of his life. Indeed, of him alone could it be said that “no deceit was ever found on his lips.”³

Could he who hadn't experienced human depravity in his conception—could he, I ask you, have experienced it in the remainder of his life? As the Apostle writes, “Though he was in the form of God ... he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”⁴

My brothers, all human beings had been slaves to sin, and that's why Paul purposely specifies that our Savior took on only the *form* of a slave. He donned human nature substantially, but without taking on its vices; he had the form of a slave, but not the culpability; he had the entire nature of man, but not the conscience of a sinner.

That's what Paul means: though Jesus was God, he assumed the *form* of a slave and was really and truly a man. He had the outward appearance of a man, but he possessed divine power. On the outside he looked like a slave, but by his nature he was God. Exteriorly he showed the weakness he'd inherited through his mother, but interiorly he possessed the majesty of his Father. Exteriorly he had merely his lowly corporeal form, but interiorly he glowed with all the brilliance of divinity.

§4 By his conduct among people, the Savior proved his twofold nature: his sufferings proved he was a man, while his miracles proved he was God. He felt hunger, so he multiplied loaves to feed the crowds which felt hunger like him; experiencing hunger proved he was human, and miraculously feeding the crowds proved he was God. He wept and consoled others who wept; his tears proved he was man, and the consolation he imparted proved he was God. He prayed and answered

³ 1 P 2:22 ⁴ Ph 2:6–8

the very prayers he formulated; by praying, he proved he was man, and by granting what he himself requested, he proved he was God.

In all things he gave proof of his twofold nature. That's why he's the indispensable mediator between God and man: for, by tilting the heavens, he elevated our earth and reunified both extremes in perfect harmony. God and man are reunited in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, having emerged from the womb of the Virgin Mary on this day, lives and reigns eternally with God the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.

Sermon 21

First Sermon for Easter

§1 A dazzling light shines for us today because the Good Thief has entered into heaven in the footsteps of the King of kings, the multitudes of the dead have risen from the grave, and the conscience of the living has triumphed.

Contemplate the Church; see the throngs of the elect, the legions of angels, and the armies of the faithful gathered around the precious altar of the Lord. The vast assembly brims with joy because the Lord of the angels has risen, the dead have left the netherworld and become alive again, people have emerged from the source of living water purified and wholly renewed.

In his goodness, God has taken care to raise the dead and renew the old man in us, as Scripture states: “The old order has passed, and the new has begun.”¹ Hence, we all cry out, “This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice in it and thrill with gladness!”²

How did the dead rejoice on stepping out from their graves? They sang the new hymn about their new life. How did the reborn throb with happiness on coming forth from the sacred waters? They sang Alleluia as they received that priceless grace.

Let us all say, “This is the day of light, the day of bread,” so that we may never again be subjected to hunger or to darkness. Instead, let us take our fill of the bread of grace rather than the murk of barbarous

¹ 2 Co 5:17 ² Ps 117:24

nations, for today the host of angels rejoices with us. Let no one ever again desire earthly bread, for, today, there is risen “the living bread which came down from heaven.”³ Today, the chains of hell have burst asunder. May the chains of each and every sin do likewise.

§2 May our holy mother the Church superabound with joy in the person of all her children. Come, O Lord, and say: “Peace be with you. No longer be afraid.”⁴ Then we shall enjoy a profound sense of security, for, in celebrating your law, we shall possess eternal light in all matters, and declare: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are with me, Lord.”⁵

Yes, be with us, O Lord, so that we need no longer fear the shadow of death but, instead, may rejoice eternally in Christ Jesus our Lord suffering, resurrecting and ascending into heaven. Through him, may we bestir ourselves and convert to the Lord.

The Lord was born, and the world was renewed; he suffered, and mankind was saved; he rose from the tomb, and hell moaned and groaned; he ascended into heaven, and his Father’s throne quivered for joy. While the Savior was suffering, the dead were rising and the living were exulting; when he resurrected, the captives felt their chains slip off, and the angels could not contain their bliss; when he ascended into heaven, the celestial spirits were enraptured—and the Apostles were downcast, but “their grief was transmuted into happiness,”⁶ dispelling the clouds which had prevented them from seeing the truth.

And so it is with us. After our dark night of struggling, gladsome light radiates upon us from the splendor of God our Savior. As the psalmist sang, “You changed my mourning into dancing, you removed my sackcloth and clothed me in gladness.”⁷

§3 Jesus’ death tore the Temple veil in two, from top to bottom; it broke open the hardest of hearts, shrouded nature in darkness, and

³ Jn 6:51 ⁴ Lk 24:36 ⁵ Ps 22:4 ⁶ Jn 16:20 ⁷ Ps 29:12

suffused our faces with spiritual light so that “we might contemplate the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces.”⁸ A mystical veil had wrapped the Old Law, but was torn as “the night ended and day was dawning.”⁹ For, behold!, “this is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice in it and be glad.”¹⁰

Every single day is of God’s making, but this one was stamped with his blood. If the dead who rose from their graves exulted, how much more should this happy day make us vibrant with joy. They walked about the holy city of Jerusalem, but we shall go to our holy mother the Church; they gathered at the banquet of the saints, but we shall partake of the table of God’s mysteries.

May the throngs of angels share in our joy and our banquet as we offer our gifts, lift up our hearts, and strike up this hymn of bliss on our lyres: “I will go to the altar of God—to God, my joy and my delight.”¹¹ Our sins are forgiven, and our chains shattered because it is God himself who delights our soul. Let us, then, say anew, “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice in it and glow with happiness!”

§4 May no one be saddened if he feels pressured to celebrate life rather than maintain his “dignity.” However plain his clothing, all that matters is that he should shine forth due to his qualities of mind and heart. That way, he will possess the loveliest glory: the glory of finding joy, not in some garment, but in the sacredness of this great day. Indeed, we are bidden to rejoice “in this day,” not in our outfits.

This day brings no black clouds, because it first has dispelled them. It comprises no darkness, because it has driven all darkness away. It has nothing to do with calumny or innuendo, because on the cross it canceled our liability to punishment. Because of our Redeemer’s innocence, he merited salvation for us, the calumniator fled, the “accuser,” the “father of lies” lost his case.

⁸ 2 Co 3:18 ⁹ Rm 13:12 ¹⁰ Ps 117:24 ¹¹ Ps 43:4

So this is a day of mercy, a day of forgiveness and deliverance. The living throb with joy, and the dead experience ineffable relief. Boundless, free, rapturous and radiant, this day is like “a thousand years in the presence of God,”¹² for it is truly “the day God has made.”

Whoever perseveres in loving God his whole life long will merit the grace of delighting eternally in this day—this day on which the saints will sing songs of bliss, be flooded with every sort of splendor, and share in their Savior’s joy as they proclaim and re-echo in chorus: “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us exult and thrill with joy!”

¹² Ps 84:4

Sermon 30

Tenth Sermon for Easter

§1 My brothers, some maintain that the word *Pasch* derives from the Greek and signifies “suffering.” That is wrong.¹ *Pasch* means “Passover,” for Scripture assigns it no other meaning, and this definition is retained in Latin also. Now, the word *Pasch*, or *Passover*, refers to God’s passing through Egypt and, in a single night, slaying every first-born in the entire country.²

But our Pasch—or Passover—commemorates the Savior’s passing from death over to life, and from the netherworld into heaven by his resurrection. And what a great, awe-inspiring Passover that was, since he thereby destroyed the very death to which he had voluntarily subjected himself, and since he had also predicted his victory, saying: “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own choosing. I have the power to lay it down, and the power to take it up again.”³

¹ In point of fact, *Pasch* comes from the Hebrew *Pesah* or *Pesach*, which means “Passover” and is immediately recognizable in derivatives such as the Spanish *Pascua*, the Italian *Pasqua*, the French *Pâques*, etc. Though earlier English translations of the Bible (the Douay Version, for instance) retained *Pasch*, the term now survives in only a few expressions, like “Paschal Lamb,” “Paschal mystery,” and “Paschal candle.” Both *Pasch* and *Paschal* have largely been replaced by *Easter* because this feast usually occurs in April, the month pagan Anglo-Saxons devoted to festivals in honor of Eostre, their goddess of spring. With time, the Old English *Eosturmonath* (“Easter-month”) was pared down to *Easter*.—Translator’s note. ² Ex 11:4–6 ³ Jn 10:18

Let us adore this fathomless decree of God's providence and mercy, for, in submitting Jesus' body to a death which he did not deserve, the Father willed to rescue us from the death which our sins had all too justly earned.

§2 Unbelievers often ask why our Lord had to die for mankind, since a mere word, a mere command, from him could have saved us. To them it is certainly a crucial question; but, with God's grace, I hope to answer it in a few words.

In the beginning, man sinned by violating God's precept; and, in accordance with the law of sin, he was condemned to death—as was only just, since, by freely consenting to temptation, he had willingly made himself a slave to his enemy. By itself, the inevitability of death sufficed to remind him of his total servitude. As is written, “Death reigned from Adam on.”⁴

Now, our God, though almighty, is also supreme truth. Therefore, while freeing us from Satan's empire through sheer mercy, he nevertheless willed to satisfy all the requirements of justice. Accordingly, he listened not only to his omnipotence but also to truth; and, unwilling to extort anything by force, he rejected violence. Though he had already regained his sovereignty over mankind, and it thus belonged to him, he lowered himself to the point of paying a ransom for the captives.

Something, my brothers, seemed to keep God from seizing, with no compensation whatsoever, the victim who had willingly placed himself under Satan's yoke. Could not God have liberated man by a simple dictate? No. That would have satisfied his omnipotence, but not his justice. Man had to be rescued from Satan's yoke, but all the requirements of justice had to be met. To accomplish that, God saved man, not by issuing a decree, but by buying him back.

Through an unfathomable mystery of justice and love, our Lord really and truly became man in order that man might redeem man by

⁴ Rm 5:14

making flesh suffer for flesh. He therefore came down in the likeness of sinful flesh, so that, by paying the wages of sin on the cross, he would have the right to destroy the sin of our flesh.

In the courts of this world, if a creditor demands more than his due, he thereby forfeits any right to repayment. In a way, this principle can be applied to Satan. He had a claim on man, but he exacted a God and thus lost his case. By asking too much, he risked getting nothing. Therefore, my brothers, was it not perfectly just that, having pounced on the innocent one, he lost the guilty one? That, having prosecuted the just one, he saw the criminal go free? For claiming what he had no right to, he lost what belonged to him in strict justice. The sin fell back on its author.

By raging against the One whom he could not subjugate, he lost the one whom he already possessed, and so failed to obtain what he was seeking. Having acquired the slave, he was now trying to lay his hands on the Lord. It was only right that, pursuing this double prey, he experienced a double loss. Indeed, the slave, realizing that he had been redeemed, escaped from him; and the Lord, by rising from the tomb, achieved the most glorious of triumphs.

§3 It is a true passing over that we celebrate today, because Christ Jesus puts death to flight and reappears in the fullness of life. Let us in turn strive to rise with him. He came down to us precisely so that we might climb up to him. By taking our humanity upon himself, he raised it up to heaven so that, through faith and hope, we might put aside our earthly pursuits and raise our minds to heavenly matters.

Just as our Savior descended into limbo in order to redeem us, so also he rose up to heaven to draw us in his wake. As Scripture teaches, “Christ is the head of everyone.”⁵ Therefore, he is our head, too, and we are his body. Now, since our head is in heaven, let us strive to reunite the body to its head.

⁵ 1 Co II:3

That is why it is such a glorious thing for human beings to offer their sons and daughters to God, since he offered us his only Son. The father of numerous children may think he is doing a great deal by offering one of them to the Lord. Still, as I just said, God delivered up his only Son for us. We hesitate to consecrate our children to God though, for our sake, he did not spare his only Son.

“How can we repay the Lord for all the good things he has showered upon us?”⁶ Even if we offered him all of our children, would that be adequate thanks? For our sake, God delivered his Son up to death; but we give him our children so that they may live.

Our Lord obeyed the will and the command of God his Father.

⁶ Ps 115:12

Sermon 38

Third Sermon for the Easter Season

§1 The numerous and profound mysteries solemnly celebrated in this Easter season were contained in the books of Scripture kept in all the ancient dwellings and oldest archives of Israel. The wondrous economy of these mysteries, and the basis they furnished for authentic faith and for religion pure and sincere—all this remained hidden, so to speak, beneath the veils of time, their sacredness shrouded in shadow.

Yet, despite those veils, the august and sublime image of the truth managed to shine through. Christ Jesus painted it on our minds, not with a palette of diverse earthly colors, but with distinct heavenly virtues protected under the shield of devotion and gleaming with all the splendor of gold. Those virtues are concentrated in the temple of his body as in their source. Radiating from his heart into ours, love becomes the fragrance which preserves our senses, and the principle which guides them.

There may be a resplendent angel presiding over sun and stars, rotating the earth, sowing fertility, tempering spring and autumn, and dividing time into hours and days and months, but it is God who commands us to celebrate this great day with due solemnity.

§2 What new blessings our Savior's passion has purchased for us, what lost treasures it has restored, no human tongue could ever tell nor memory compute.

In the Gospel he says: “No one puts a lamp under a basket, but up on a lampstand so it can give light to everyone in the house.”¹ Well, at its first appearance on earth, and then in the passion, the light was placed on the lampstand of the cross. But at the second coming, it will arrive in all its splendor, and reign for ever from that sacred lampstand. Christ shines before the eyes of Gentile and Jew in order to form his Church from the reunion of them both.

He is our light; and although we wait for him to come again, we nonetheless believe he has already come. Though he came in lowliness to serve, he will return in majesty to rule. Though he came full of kindness, he will return to judge. Though he came amid suffering and pain, he will return to wield power. And though he came to heal our infirmities, he will come to uproot all vice.

Let no one imagine that in his second coming he will allow us to deny that he came once before. No, he will then be a fearsome judge for all who refused to recognize him as their savior. We know and we believe that Jesus Christ will come to judge each and every one of us. But, having come once as a doctor in order to save us, he will then come in order to reign as King of kings, as supreme, eternal Lord and Master.

§3 His crown, his sash and his shoes are enhanced with precious gems designating the patriarchs, the prophets and the apostles. The patriarchs compose the crown on his forehead, not to adorn it, but to be adorned by the Lord. It was of the patriarchs that St. Paul wrote: “... from them, according to the flesh, is the Messiah, God, who is over all the blessed for ever.”² His sash is formed by the prophets, whose teachings constitute the undoable knot of discipline. And his shoes represent the apostles, of whom Scripture says: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!”³

In this kingdom we also see the martyrs gleaming like priceless gems, the confessors like emeralds, the virgins like pearls, and the faithful like

¹ Mt 5:15 ² Rm 9:5 ³ Rm 10:15

amethysts. Robed in the royal purple of his passion, Jesus, the eternal King, carries the scepter of empire, the seat of justice, the august throne of sovereign power.

Having suffered for those who believe, he will reign for his saints, and judge everyone who has rebelled against him. Just as nobody who wants to be healthy would turn against his doctor, so faith makes us friends of our King, whereas disbelief would make us guilty and therefore subject to his justice.

§4 He whose origin is wholly celestial came down from heaven and descended all the way to the netherworld in order to liberate mankind. And so it is that, after abasing himself unto death—and death on a cross—our risen Christ entered as victor into the splendors of heaven. It is a mystery, but it is also a fact: a fact firmly believed and faithfully preached.

During the Savior's passion, the sun refused to shine, day fled, the darkness grew deeper and deeper, night unfurled its hideous inky curtain over the entire face of the earth, the stars bewailed this atrocious parricide, the moon joined the sun in mourning, and all of nature was appalled at the cruelty of the Jews.

In this combat of Christ against Satan, of an unarmed man against a fully armed foe, in this duel of David against Goliath, Jesus won the victory over his mighty and brutal adversary. Stripped of his garments, with his body nailed to the cross, this merely thirty-three year old Savior triumphed over the devil, not by the sword, but by the radiance of his cross.

He then descended to the netherworld and forced it to release his chosen ones. After his resurrection, he instructed his disciples. Notice that when teaching, he is reason itself; when judging, he is the law; delivering souls, he is grace; suffering, he is the Lamb; laid in the tomb, he is man; rising from it, he is God.

To us also he has promised resurrection and an eternal reward. To earthly men he gives heavenly things, and to mortals immortality; to corpses he gives living souls; to frail bodies, resurrection; to the dead, life; and to those he has regenerated, salvation.

My brothers, let us hold fast to this belief, so that we may merit to live eternally with our God and our Savior.

Sermon 40

On the Ascension of the Lord

§1 My brothers and sisters, anxiety makes me ask myself why the great solemnity we're celebrating today doesn't draw a greater number of the faithful, and why this happy day fails to make Christians thrill with joy.

Why isn't it a day of feasting and fellowship like Christmas? Christmas gave Jesus Christ our Savior to earth; the Ascension restored him to heaven. At Christmas he deigned to assume our humanity; on the day of his Ascension he manifested his divinity. Christmas bespeaks the grace which springs inexhaustibly from his humility; the Ascension confirms our faith in his adorable Godhead. Christmas presents him coming forth from a virginal womb; the Ascension shows him going to occupy the very throne of God. On Christmas day he comes down to redeem us; at the Ascension he goes up to intercede for us. At Christmas his Father sends him; at the Ascension his Father receives him. (We know, however, that he was never separated from his Father—even when dwelling among us. Though visiting earth, he didn't leave heaven.)

How great a solemnity this day is, my brothers and sisters, when Jesus our Redeemer so powerfully proclaims his divinity, and is seen rising to heaven solely to show us all the more clearly that he descended to earth. "No one," he states, "has gone up to heaven except him who has come down from heaven—the Son of Man."¹ And a psalmist had

¹ Jn 3:13

long before sung: “He came from highest heaven, and he returns to highest heaven.”² Having concealed himself from everyone’s gaze on coming down to earth, he wants his Ascension to be all the more visible. At his Incarnation, nothing had impressed the human eye; but at his Ascension, everything had to be manifest and plain to see, in order to strengthen our faith.

The Lord is full of mercy and pity. So when he comes solely to redeem and save us, we see his humanity alone as he embraces opprobrium, torture, crucifixion, burial and all the outward symptoms of human infirmity, thus becoming an object of scandal for haughty unbelievers. But if on Christmas day he chose only abasement and humiliation in order to save us, on the day of his Ascension he willed to have the full splendor of his divinity blaze forth, so that we, having deemed him a man among men, might proclaim him to be truly God.

§2 Scripture informs us that, after his passion, our God and Savior presented himself alive to the Apostles, gave them abundant proof of his Resurrection, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God for forty days.³ After enduring the cross and death, and before rising to heaven, Jesus also appeared to many persons on earth during these forty days which — from Easter till today — we spend in holy freedom because they’re a time, not of sadness, but of joy, in keeping with our Savior’s words: “Can the wedding guests mourn while the bridegroom is with them?”⁴

Once those days were over, and “as all the disciples were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.”⁵ Let the Jews listen to that statement; let the Gentiles listen and be astounded. They jeered at him as he hung upon the cross. So let them now ponder the account of his Ascension into heaven. They cited the humiliations of Calvary. So let them now bear witness to the splendors of this day.

² Ps 119:6 ³ Ac 1:3 ⁴ Mt 9:15 ⁵ Ac 1:9

Next we read: “Suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will return in the same way you have seen him going into heaven.’”⁶ So, after accomplishing his mission on earth, Jesus had just returned to heaven when celestial envoys came to confirm what the disciples had seen, and to reassure them that they weren’t the victims of some illusion, thus enabling them to attest personally not only to the fact of the Savior’s Ascension but also to his promised return to earth at the end of the world.

The Gospels contain the same teaching as the book of Acts: “He led them as far as Bethany and raised his hands in blessing. As he blessed the disciples, he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. They paid him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy.”⁷

Because the Savior abased himself for us, it is for us also that he displays a wholly divine splendor in his person. From the celestial throne which is his by right, he shows us that heaven is now open to us. Not content with having saved mankind, he wants to glorify it. And so our humanity, in which he deigned to clothe himself, today makes its triumphal entry into heaven. What an honor for the clay of which we are made, since it now reigns in heaven!

§3 Having fasted for forty days in preparation for Easter, we rejoiced for another forty days after. The first forty ended with the feast of the Resurrection, and the second forty end with today’s great solemnity of the Ascension, on which our Savior deprives us of his visible presence—without, however, ceasing to dwell with us. While he was physically in our midst, he was not separated from his Father; likewise, now that he has returned to his Father, he’s not separated from us. Far from deserting us like strangers, he remains with us and lives in our midst,

⁶ Ac 1:11 ⁷ Lk 24:51–52

as he personally reassures us: “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.... I am going away, but I will come back to you.”⁸

Therefore, Jesus *is* living among us, consoling those who suffer anguish and pain, helping those in danger, assisting the unfortunate and the afflicted. I repeat: Jesus is with us, present not only in our labors but also in our words and our thoughts. Scrutinizing and fathoming our very heart, he sees what our senses, our hands and our minds beget. How well ordered, them, our life should be; how pious and chaste, since we’re always under God’s watchful eyes!

You’re well aware of this doctrine, my brothers and sisters. Neglectful servants cringe and fawn when their earthly master is present, and they don’t cut themselves any slack unless they’re sure he’s not watching. You Christians, however, know full well that you can never hide from the Lord’s gaze.

Wherever you go, you carry your conscience with you. If those lax servants I mentioned before were in their master’s presence day and night, do you think they’d ever allow themselves to disobey his orders? Since God is present everywhere and, therefore, is always with you, what docility should awe and respect for his presence inspire in you! In his mercy, he’ll always be here to protect us; but he’ll also be here as the witness and avenger of all our failings.

To this God, who is as good as he is just, and as terrible as he is merciful, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

⁸ Jn 14:1, 27–28

Sermon 41

On the Ascension of the Lord

§1 The account in the Acts of the Apostles would alone suffice to prove the Ascension and portray the details of that wondrous event for us. Still, my brothers and sisters, I'd reproach myself if I remained silent today. Why? Because if the Church ever has the right and the duty to rejoice, isn't it on the day when the Savior opens heaven for her? Therefore, since the Scriptures contain nothing superfluous, I'll try to interpret the sacred text for you to the best of my ability.

§2 First of all, Scripture informs us that, after his Resurrection, Christ Jesus remained with his Apostles for forty days. This detail is important because those forty days correspond exactly to the forty days of Lenten penance. Those, therefore, who endured the privations of that period for God's sake are entitled to rejoice in his presence during the forty days following the Resurrection. And those whom fear brought low should feel buoyed up by the consolations he showers upon them.

What joy for those who, having suffered for the love of God, are now aware of possessing an ineffable reward which is none other than God himself! In the light of present things let us judge those of the future, since everything we do for God's glory gives us ever greater title to the bliss of possessing him.

§3 The presence of these many witnesses who see and hear assures us that Jesus really and truly ascended into heaven. What they saw, we believe with liveliest faith. Indeed, they saw in order that we might believe. They contemplated with the eyes of their body in order that we might perceive with the eyes of our soul.

Nor is this a matter of some few witnesses, lone and anonymous. On the contrary, they're numerous and perfectly reliable. Their very number corroborates their testimony, and their holiness confirms its veracity. Now, if in certain cases, the testimony of two or three witnesses suffices, what certitude must result from the deposition of an entire multitude—and such a true and holy multitude! Surely, they were virtuous and faithful if they merited the grace of contemplating the Lord as he rose to heaven. Therefore, let us believe that, along with them, we behold what they beheld. Given the testimony of a multitude of saints, how could we Christians possibly hesitate?

§4 To that, let's add the apparition of two angels who came down from heaven to corroborate the miracle of the Ascension for those who had just witnessed it. We should admire the wisdom of Scripture in mentioning these angels to teach us that the blessed spirits served as a retinue for Jesus as he rose to heaven.

To me, this detail furnishes another point of resemblance between our Savior's nativity and his triumphal entry into paradise. The angel Gabriel was sent to herald the Incarnation; and today, angels surround Jesus as he mounts to heaven. Then, a star announced the Savior's birth; today, a cloud enwraps him and carries him higher and higher. Then, the angels sang on earth; today again, they testify before the world. Then, the Magi adored him and offered gifts; today, the Apostles' gaze follows him as he rises into heaven. Abundant testimony verifies the Savior's birth, and equally abundant testimony verifies his Ascension in order to strengthen the faith of the human race. As a result, having beheld him born in the flesh, we may all contemplate him ascending to heaven.

§5 Jesus, then, who came down from heaven, has gone back up. Yes, he has returned there, but he has promised to revisit earth some day. Haven't we heard the angels ask, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will return the same way you saw him go up"?¹

So, my brothers and sisters, if we believe that Jesus will return, we should await him, lest we be caught unprepared, like feckless servants surprised by the sudden arrival of their disgruntled master. Present happenings, after all, foreshadow things to come.

§6 If we don't choose to benefit from the punishments weighing on us now, let's fear the harsh punishments in store for the future. The Apostle warns us: "The Lord will come like a thief in the night."² You see, brothers and sisters, that unwarranted self-satisfaction can be followed by unimaginable torment. Therefore, let's fear lest we be condemned to suffer the very things we refuse to endure now. That way, fear of the penalty will help us avoid it. And God, who is full of kindness and mercy, will, when he witnesses our sincere conversion, forgive us our present failings and grant us blessings for the future.

That's how forgiveness itself—through the renewal of our life—becomes the very principle of our hope for goods to come. By pardoning our sins, God both allows and obliges us to hope for eternal happiness.

¹ Ac 1:11 ² 1 Th 5:2

Sermon 3

On Deferring Conversion

§1 Our frequent exhortations concerning good works have taught us that some of our brothers are sluggish about justice and almsgiving, while others are always on the ready for avarice and impurity—both mindsets suggesting that these people no longer fear the judgment to come. Indeed, at the sight of these negligent, cowardly Christians who don't even try to avoid sin and aren't the least bit interested in guaranteeing an eternal reward for good deeds, isn't it only natural to conclude that they no longer believe in good being rewarded and evil being punished as the necessary consequence of God's judgment?

If, then, the fear of divine judgment still exists somewhere, it is solely in the heart of those who devote themselves to doing good works. As for those who neglect good works, spiritual reading and prayer, or perform them only to make a good impression, what do they gain by their show of faith if their behavior gives them the lie? They should heed these words of St. James: "What good will it do someone to claim he has faith if he does not have works? Can his 'faith' save him? If one of your brothers or sisters has nothing to wear and nothing to eat, and you say, 'Go in peace, keep warm and eat well,' but give them nothing for their bodily needs, what good are your wishes? So, too, faith by itself—if it produces no works—is dead."¹

¹ Jm 2:14–17

It's to such people that God speaks, condemning their faithlessness: "Oh, you unbelievers, if you have no faith in my promises, remember that I created heaven and earth. I spoke, and it was done.² As for you to whom my promises are made, you didn't even exist, and so I created you. Do you suppose that, after giving the gift of life to someone who lacked it, I'd then deceive him? Therefore, consider my words attentively and remember that I will always keep the promises I make to you."

§2 Oh, how weak and sickly, how ignorant and regrettable, how impotent and criminal is that disastrous belief which conjures up every possible obstacle to conversion and allows only evil and sin to enter the soul! Today is flitting past, as will tomorrow, and tomorrow will lead to another brief tomorrow. Still, as you postpone conversion day after day, you don't worry that sudden death could snatch you away. You who always put off doing penance, and who claim to be trusting in divine mercy, don't you realize how many people die suddenly?

You admit that conversion is a good thing. Well, since it is, convert right now! For if receiving grace is good, how could receiving it immediately be bad? Please explain why you're in no hurry to receive what you yourself agree is good and, therefore, desirable. Perhaps you'll claim that God himself reassures you. Pardon me, but exactly how does he do that?

—"Well, isn't it written that 'on the day a sinner turns away from all the sins he has committed, I will not remember any of them'?"³ That's how God makes me feel safe. Yesterday I had ten sins, today I have fifteen, and tomorrow I may have twenty. Even so, relying on God's infallible word, I know that on the day I convert he'll forget all my past sins and iniquities. I know it. He said so. So why are you trying to scare me? God promises me forgiveness, yet you'd drive me to despair."

² see Gn 1:6ff ³ Ezk 18:21-22

—I can't deny that God made that promise. Why, then, don't you convert today?

—“Because, however late I convert, God has promised to forgive me a great number of sins, just as he'd forgive me a smaller number today.”

—Oh, what a false sense of security!

—“Still, that's exactly what gives me peace.”

—I admit that God has promised to forgive you; but who has guaranteed you'll live to see tomorrow? That's why I urge everyone to convert to the Lord promptly, in keeping with this other text: “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call to him while he is near. Let the scoundrel mend his ways, and the wicked man banish his evil thoughts.”⁴ Convert now, because you're relying on an unfounded hope.

As a matter of fact, the human race is largely lost because of two excesses: some by hoping, others by despairing. What may surprise you is that anyone can perish by hoping.

§3 So let's briefly examine who loses his soul by hoping, and who loses it by despairing. Then we'll see the remedy God presents to us all.

Despair condemns the person who says, “I'm aware of my sins; I know my every crime. How could God possibly forgive all the evil I've done?” Again, despair drives another to say, “What do I care about all your exhortations? I'll sin as much as I can and wish I could sin more. If God must condemn me for one sin, he may as well condemn me for a million. If I'm not going to possess eternal life, at least I'll make the most of this life. Why not do whatever I please? Why not satisfy my every passion?”

Seeking to avoid the horror of despair, others lose their soul through presumption. How so? They say, “God has promised to forgive my sins the day I convert; so I hope that in his mercy he'll just forget them all.” Bolstered by this false confidence, they keep putting off conversion; but suddenly death strikes, their last hope fades away, and all that remains

⁴ Is 55:6–7

for them is damnation. Scripture has salutary warnings for such people. You wanted to be lost through despair, so listen to this word of the Lord's: "Do I derive any pleasure from the death of the wicked? Do I not instead rejoice when they turn away from evil so that they may live?"⁵ You who wanted to die, come back and live! If God willed your death, he'd strike you in the very act of sinning so grievously. Instead, by letting you live, he's inviting you to repentance.

You have no hope? Then listen as he says, "I do not wish sinners to die in their sins." You may want your death, but God doesn't. Though you aren't the author of your life, you intend to lose it through despair. When you didn't yet exist, God created you; when you lost your soul through sin, he went searching for you; when he found you through the blood of his Son, he redeemed you, and now he keeps offering you the remedy for all your ills. So climb out of this chasm of despair because he wants, not the death of sinners, but their return to life.

§4 Although you were headed for perdition, you escaped from the abyss of despair. Now, avoid the opposite extreme and strive for a happy medium. If you no longer despair of being forgiven, neither should you count on a long life. So be converted.

—"I'll convert tomorrow."

—Why not today?

—"What harm is there in waiting till tomorrow?"

—And what harm in converting today?

—"But I'm sure I'll live to be a hundred!"

—God hasn't promised you any such thing, though maybe some clairvoyant has, so he'd "enjoy" your company in hell. Well, let's suppose you're right and you do live to a ripe old age. If you have a long life, make it a good one; and if it's short, again let it at least be good. Why do you so hate your life that you want to fill it with evil and be wicked in the midst of all your goods?

⁵ Ezk 18:23

Tell me now, my brother, do you really know how long you're going to live? And where did you see that you'll be forgiven without even changing your ways? Have you read somewhere that you've been promised longevity, or have you perhaps made a pact with death? I hope you do live to be a hundred. Let's add a thousand years to that—and then what? Suppose Adam had lived right down to the present day: even so, his life would have been short, since it would eventually have come to an end.

§5 Therefore, always be free from sin, always be prepared, and you'll have no reason to fear the great day of judgment, which “will come like a thief in the night”⁶ to claim those who are asleep. And you who choose to perish through despair, listen to what Sacred Scripture tells you: “I take no pleasure in anyone's death. Return to me, and live!”

If you've emerged from despair, listen again to another saying which will liberate you from your perversity and establish you in legitimate hope. Hear what the Lord tells those who nourish false hope and put off conversion day after day: “Do not delay your conversion to God, nor defer it day after day.”⁷ I'm not the one who says that. It's God himself. He urges both you and me not to put off returning to him. And yet you say, “Tomorrow! *Cras!*” Oh, that's truly the cawing of a crow. Having left Noah's ark, the crow never went back but grew old repeating “*Cras, cras, cras*”—the cry of a crow, with his white head and black heart. He left the ark and never returned, whereas the dove hastened back. Let the crow's cawing cease, then, so we may hear only the cooing of the dove.

In order to console you, the Lord never stops saying, “Do not delay returning to God, nor put it off day after day, for his wrath will suddenly blaze forth, and he will reject you on the day of his vengeance.”⁸

Beloved brethren, meditate on those words with fear and trembling; and, with the grace of God, heal your souls with the remedies of peni-

⁶ Mt 24:43 ⁷ Si 5:8 ⁸ Si 5:8–9

tence and almsgiving, so that you may present yourselves before Christ's judgment seat, not to be condemned, but to be crowned with immortality.

Sermon 4

The Two Roads

§1 It's our Savior himself who tells us in the Gospel: "Enter by the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad the road leading to destruction, and many there are who go that route. But how narrow the gate and hemmed in is the road leading to life, and few there are who find it!"¹

As you can see, the Lord teaches that there are two roads lying before us—one narrow, the other wide; one leading to life, the other to death. So, my dearly beloved brothers, if you don't want to perish eternally, flee the road to death and choose the road to life so that you may live eternally. For, as our Savior warns, the broad, spacious way leads to damnation.

§2 Now, exactly what is that roomy thoroughfare, the one used solely by vices and evil passions? And why is it called broad? Because it's constantly traveled by swarms of people. Just as our earthly roads are called highways because they're much used and, consequently, offer many attractions, so, from the spiritual viewpoint, a broad way is one frequented by multitudes of people who indulge in vice.

So, my dear friends, keep off the broad road—in other words, keep off the highway of shame and vice. Bypass the road of drunkenness, which is wide because it accommodates all the intemperate. Bypass the road of impurity, which also is wide because it services all the unchaste.

¹ Mt 7:13–14

Bypass the road of greed, which is swarming with all who seize their neighbor's goods. Yes, bypass that road, which is so ardently desired and sought out by such vast throngs of people. "For," as our Lord reminds us, "many are called, but few are chosen."²

Therefore don't let yourselves be tempted either by society or by the example of the majority, since there are always more people who love sin rather than righteousness. Isn't it preferable to possess the heavenly and eternal kingdom with the few than to plunge into death and eternal punishment with the crowd? Follow the small number of the just rather than the multitude of sinners. Merit eternal life with the few, and fear hell despite the hordes who gleefully dive into it.

§3 "How narrow and steep," the Lord remarks, "is the way that leads to life, and how few there are who find it!" He just said that the travelers on the highway are numerous; but as soon as he mentions the narrow way, he notes: "How few there are who find it!"

These statements prove that the narrow path is difficult not only to negotiate but even to find. By saying that so few find it, our Savior is teaching us that a great number of people seem to be searching for it, but that a very small number deserve to find it. Why so many seekers and so few finders? Because not everyone searches for it with equal diligence. Some are most eager, and others quite apathetic, though success is promised only to those who seek with zeal and good will.

Nowadays many people, simply because they are members of the Church, appear to be seeking salvation. But are they all equally assiduous, equally persevering? Is searching for the road to salvation compatible with yielding to intemperance, all the while showing up for religious services? What about giving oneself over to avarice though seemingly belonging to the Church? Is one seeking the road to salvation if he sheds his brother's blood or smears himself with the filth of impurity? All these vices lead straight to death—which is why those

² Mt 20:11

who walk that road can't simultaneously be looking for the road to life. That's why our Savior lamented, "How few there are who find it!"

There are so few, in fact, that one hardly ever meets any, and this narrow way thus seems hidden and invisible. That perception is only too true, since the narrow way is concealed with regard, not to a single matter or area, but to the most diverse matters and the most numerous virtues. It's hidden in faith and in belief, for, in order to discover the road to life, we must believe faithfully, according to the dictum "Unless you believe, you will not understand." Just as no one can understand God unless previously guided by faith, so no one can reach eternal life unless faith shows him the way and opens the door for him. From this viewpoint, the road to life is hidden in faith.

But it's also hidden in chastity, for, the Apostle warns: "The impure will not possess the kingdom of God."³ If, then, the unchaste don't attain to life, eternal bliss has to be exclusively for the chaste.

The road to life is likewise concealed in alms and charitable deeds. "Almsgiving," Scripture teaches, "saves one from death and expiates every sin,"⁴ whereas avarice leads one to hell.

§4 My brothers, if you want to seek and discover the one right path, you must love and faithfully safeguard the virtues which constitute the road to life. For he who follows this route will enter into eternal light and possess the life which never ends. Amen.



You will show me the path to life, abounding joy in your presence, delights at your right hand forever.⁵

³ 1 Co 6:9 ⁴ Tb 12:4 ⁵ Ps 16:11

Sermon 20

On Confessing Our Sins

§1 With one voice and one heart we've just prayed to God concerning that very heart, saying: "Create a pure heart for me, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."¹ And now, for the glory of divine grace, I'll share with you some insights the Lord has granted me into our text.

In this psalm we see a repentant sinner praying to regain his blighted hope. Crushed under the weight of his fall, he implores God with loud cries to come to his rescue. Though the poor wretch was able to wound himself, he can't heal himself. Isn't it true that we're quite capable of abusing and harming our bodies when we so choose, but that we need a doctor to restore our health since we're better at destroying than curing ourselves?

So, too, our soul can sin with no outside help; but to heal the wounds of sin, we need God's saving hand. Hence these words from another psalm: "I prayed, 'Have mercy on me, Lord! Heal me, for I have sinned against you.'"² This text clearly shows that, deep within itself, our soul possesses the will and the freedom to sin, and therefore needs nothing further to damn itself, but that God must come and restore it once it has done itself in. "The Son of Man has come to seek and save what was lost."³ That's why we repeat, "A pure heart create for me, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." Pray like that, sinful soul, lest

¹ Ps 51:12 ² Ps 41:5 ³ Lk 19:10

you damn yourself through despair even more than you already have through your other sins.

§2 First of all, we must take care not to sin, not to form a dangerous friendship with the serpent. Since he uses his venomous fangs to kill sinners, he's not someone to enter into partnership with. But if he succeeds in pressuring the weak, seducing the imprudent, catching the strays by surprise, tricking and leading them all into sin, his victims shouldn't be afraid to admit it and accuse—rather than excuse—themselves. That's precisely what we ask for, like this other psalmist: "Lord, set a guard on my mouth, a gatekeeper at my lips. Let not my heart incline to evil, and then, with lying words, seek excuses for my sins."⁴

Without a moment's wavering, reject the very first suggestion of sin. And if you do give in, don't try to explain it away, but face your guilt squarely. Didn't the psalmist who requested a pure heart begin by asking: "Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness. In your abundant compassion, blot out my offense"⁵ A great sinner, he begs for great mercy; for a deep wound, he wants a deep remedy. Only after does he add, "Turn your face away from my sins; blot out all my guilt. A pure heart create for me, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."⁶ Thus God averts his gaze from our sins when we confess them, when we accuse ourselves, and implore his divine help and mercy.

Yet, although he looks away from the sin, he doesn't look away from the sinner. Here we pray: "Turn your eyes away from my sin, and blot out all my iniquity." But in another psalm we entreat him: "Hide not your face from me, nor repel your servant in anger. You are my help: do not cast me off! Do not forsake me, O God my Savior!"⁷

God looks away when he sees nothing; but when he does see something, he punishes it, as judges do when sentencing defendants who've

⁴ Ps 141:3-4 ⁵ Ps 51:1 ⁶ Ps 51:11-12 ⁷ Ps 27:9

been proved guilty. We ask God to look away from our sins because we don't want him to punish us severely and berate us.

Now, if you want God to overlook your lapses, acknowledge them yourself. For sin can't remain unpunished: that'd be unseemly, improper, unjust. And since it must be punished, punish it yourself so as not to be punished for it. Let it find in you a judge, not a defense attorney. Mount the tribunal of your conscience, and stand there before yourself—not behind, for, otherwise, God will stand you before his very self.

Furthermore, in order to be readily pardoned, the penitent in our psalm says: "I know my offense. My sin is always before me."⁸ It's as if he were saying, "Because my sin is always before me, it shouldn't be before you. Ignore it, since I admit it." You see, your sin will be punished either by you or by God. If you punish it, the *sin* will be punished, not you; but if God does, you'll be punished along with it. Denounce it, therefore, so that God may defend you. Say frankly, "Yes, I did this." Make the psalmist's words your own: "I said, 'Lord, have pity on me. Heal me, for I have sinned against you.'" Then add, "It's I who have sinned. I'll not try to excuse myself by pinning the blame on someone else—someone who likewise sinned by tempting me or egging me on. I'm not saying, 'Circumstances drove me to it' or 'It just was in the cards.' Nor am I blaming Satan."

Satan, of course, may very well suggest sin; he may frighten and even torment us if he's been permitted to. But we must ask the Lord for strength, lest we be enticed by the demon's blandishments or cowed by his violence. To combat both the charms and the threats, may God grant us two virtues: one enabling us to control, and the other to withstand—to control our passions and not be trapped by good fortune, to withstand Satan's terrors and not be disheartened by adversity. "Knowing that I could not possess virtue unless God granted it to me, I went

⁸ Ps 51:5

to the Lord and begged for it with all my heart”⁹—which is the same as saying: “A pure heart create for me, O my God.” Scripture also warns: “Woe to craven hearts and drooping hands... Woe to the faint of heart, who trust not... Woe to you who have lost hope....”¹⁰

So don’t try to blame anyone. Otherwise, you may run into an accuser whom you can’t rebut. Our enemy himself, the devil, is delighted when we accuse him; he positively wants us to, and he’s ready to shoulder all the reproaches we heap on him—provided we don’t admit that we’ve sinned. To frustrate his ruses, let’s imitate the penitent who cries out: “I said, ‘O Lord...’” In vain does our enemy then set traps for us: we’re onto his tricks. He hopes to commandeer our tongue and force us to say, “The devil made me do it.” But, instead, we humbly repeat: “I said, ‘O Lord...’”

Through such wiles, the devil ensnares souls and keeps them away from the remedy of confession. Sometimes he suggests that we should exculpate ourselves and lay the blame on someone else; or, if we admit our guilt, he drives us to despair, saying we can never be forgiven; or again, he persuades us that God immediately forgets everything, so that there’s no need to mend our ways.

§3 Consider, therefore, the dangers we must beware of. Lest we blame someone else, we should remember these words: “I said, ‘Lord, take pity on me. Heal my soul, for I have sinned against you.’” Still, we mustn’t succumb to despair, imagining that we can’t be healed of our offenses, however numerous and however serious they may be. At the same time, we mustn’t surrender to our passions, to our every desire, doing whatever we please regardless of principles, or refraining solely through human respect. Neither should we do like gladiators or anyone else marked for slaughter, giving in to everything which promises to satisfy our disordered instincts and tendencies, and then perishing miserably from despair. To protect us from ourselves—that is, from such baneful

⁹ Ws 8:21 ¹⁰ Si 2:12–14

ideas—Scripture is careful to remind us that “when the wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed, keeps all my statutes, and does what is right and just ... none of his crimes will be remembered against him.”¹¹

Unfortunately, once cured of despair by trusting in those words, the soul comes upon another pitfall. If despair couldn’t destroy it, presumption can.

Now, who can fall victim to presumption? Here he is: the man who says, “God has promised to forgive and forget the past when we decide to give up sin and observe his commandments. Great! So I’ll keep doing whatever I please, I’ll convert whenever I choose, and all my sins’ll be erased!” What do you say to such a person? That God doesn’t bother healing repentant sinners? That he really doesn’t forgive all a convert’s sins? Of course not. That’d mean questioning divine mercy, contradicting the message of the prophets, and rejecting God’s promises. No faithful steward of the word would do that.

§4 “So,” someone may object, “you’d drop the reins and let sinners run wild, promising them forgiveness—immunity, no less!—whenever they decide to change? You’re just encouraging them to sin. With nothing to hold them back, they’ll dive into evil frenziedly, till their dream eventually turns into a nightmare.”

Just a minute! Would Scripture have antidotes against despair, but nothing against deceptive hope? Listen to what it teaches concerning such perverse and ill-fated confidence: “Say not, ‘I have sinned, yet nothing has befallen me.’ The Lord bides his time... Delay not your conversion to the Lord; put it not off from day to day. For suddenly his wrath will flame forth, and on the day of vengeance you will be destroyed.”¹²

Do you understand, you presumptuous soul? You’ll perish if you despair, and perish if you hope. Where, then, will you be safe? How

¹¹ Ezk 18:21–22 ¹² Si 5:4, 8–9

can you avoid this twin pitfall? How set foot on the straight and narrow road to serve God, to take pity on your soul, and be pleasing in the sight of the Lord? When you despaired, you were told, “Whenever the impious soul is converted, I will forget all his offenses.” So you reveled in excessive confidence, and were warned, “Do no delay in returning to the Lord, and do not put it off day after day.” Divine providence and mercy, you’ll notice, surround you on all sides.

And what do you reply to all that?

“God promised to forgive me, and he will when I *convert*.”

Of course he’ll grant you forgiveness when you return to him. So why delay?

“Because he’ll forgive me *whenever* I convert.”

There’s no doubt about that; he’ll forgive you the minute you return to him. But when will that be? Why can’t it be today? Why not now while I’m talking and you’re listening? Why not at this very moment when you’re applauding yourself and cheering yourself on—down the wrong path? Why not here and now, when my words are supporting you, and yours are condemning you?

“No! Tomorrow, for God has *promised* to forgive me.”

And I suppose it’s your faith which guarantees you a tomorrow? All right, then, if you can show me in the Holy Bible where God has promised you a tomorrow, just as he has promised to forgive everyone who returns to him, I’ll agree with you and say, “Fine! Wait till tomorrow.”

Still, isn’t he the same one who sought to instill a salutary fear in you, reproaching you justly and warning: “Delay not your conversion from day to day, for my wrath will flame forth suddenly”?

So, in your wisdom, you’re afraid of living a virtuous life for longer than two days, are you? If tomorrow is the starting date, begin today, and that’ll make two days. That way, if tomorrow never comes, today

will guarantee your safety. And if you're still alive tomorrow, that'll be one day more.

Do you mean to tell me you desire a long life but don't care if it's a bad one? You choose to live long and sinfully? You seek prolonged evil? Why not, instead, seek long-lasting goodness? I'm sure you want all your belongings to be in good condition, so why would life be the one thing that you'd allow to fall apart and collapse on you?

What kind of clothes do you want?

"Good quality, good styling."

What sort of wife?

"A good one!"

What sort of children?

"Good children, naturally."

What kind of house?

"A good one, of course!"

So life is the one thing which you deliberately want to be bad? I just don't understand... It's dearer to you than all your other possessions, and yet it's the only one you purposely choose to make bad...

Let's suppose a robber broke in and growled, "All this stuff or your life!" You'd sacrifice every last thing, wouldn't you—clothes, spouse, furniture, home, and so forth—in order to save your life, evil though it is. Then, why not want it to be good, since you'd give up everything else for it? See? You no longer have any excuse, do you?

Now go and confess your sins, lest you be condemned.

Sermon 21

On Loving and Serving God

§1. With heart and voice we've just sung these words which the Christian conscience addresses to the Lord: "The just will rejoice in the Lord"¹—not in the world. And elsewhere we read: "Light dawns for the just, and gladness for honest hearts."² Do you wonder where this gladness comes from? Then listen: "The just will rejoice in the Lord"; and if the other psalm promises that "light dawns for the just," we also read: "Find your delight in the Lord, and he will grant your heart's desire."³

What does that mean? What does it both demand and promise? We're told to rejoice in the Lord, but how can we rejoice in something we don't see? Do we see God? Seeing him is precisely the happiness we're promised, but at present "we walk by faith, not by sight, since we are still at home in the body and, so, away from the Lord."⁴ Mark those phrases: "by faith, not by sight." We'll actually see only when John's words are fulfilled: "Beloved, we are God's children now, but what we shall be has not yet been revealed. However, we know that when it is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."⁵ Then there'll be immense joy, perfect and overflowing—no longer the milk of hope, but the robust food of reality.

¹ Ps 64:11 ² Ps 97:11 ³ Ps 37:4 ⁴ 2 Co 5:6–7 ⁵ 1 Jn 3:2

Meanwhile, before the reality comes to you, and before you go to it, rejoice in the Lord! Do you at present experience only faint joy in the hope which reality will one day crown? Here, amid the things of time and the joys of earthly life, you give your heart to many objects which simply can't deliver what you yearn for; and yet how ardently you pursue what you never attain! Thus, for example, you love money, but you wouldn't unless you stood a chance of having some. Or you may love a woman before marrying her, but not after; in fact, you may detest her as intensely after the wedding as you desired her before. Why? Because she hasn't lived up to your heart's expectations.

As for God, on the other hand, if we love him while he's still absent, he surely won't be less lovable when present. However lofty a concept the human mind may form of the supreme good which God is, it'll never be adequate but always infinitely short of the reality; and possessing him will necessarily give us incalculably more than we could ever imagine. If, then, we've been able to love him without seeing him, we'll love him much more once we do see him. For now, consequently, we love him with hope. Hence, the psalmist sings: "The just rejoice in the Lord," and, because they don't yet see him, "he will fulfill their hope."⁶

§2. Still, we possess the first fruits of the Spirit, and so we can draw near to the object of our love, even tasting—however slightly—what we are called to eat and drink avidly. How can we prove that? Here's how. This God, in whom we're commanded to place our love and find our happiness, is neither gold nor silver, neither earth nor sky, neither sunlight nor everything that shines in the heavens or glows so brightly on earth. He's not a body, but a spirit. Accordingly, he declares that "those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth."⁷

Because he's not a body, he's not in those places where bodies are. He's not on some high mountain; so you shouldn't imagine that climbing one would bring you closer to him. In truth, the Lord is the Most High,

⁶ Ps 37:4 ⁷ Jn 4:24

but he stoops and draws near to humble souls, and looks from afar upon the proud.⁸ Since he's the Most High and looks at the haughty from afar, mustn't he look upon the lowly from farther still? If his grandeur places him so high above the proud that he must actually look down on them, doesn't that same grandeur distance him even farther from the lowly? Not at all! He's exalted *and* he lowers himself to the humble. How? "The Lord is close to the broken-hearted."⁹ So don't search for a tall mountain as if it'd lift you closer to him. If you elevate yourself, he goes away; but if you humble yourself, he comes down to you. The tax collector kept his distance in the temple, and God drew near to him all the more readily; this self-confessed sinner wouldn't even raise his eyes to heaven, but he already carried within himself the Creator of heaven.¹⁰

How, then, can you rejoice in the Lord if he's so far from you? Well, you're the one who draws him close or drives him away. Love him, and he'll draw near; love him, and he'll dwell in you. "The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all."¹¹

Do you want to know how he dwells in you if you love him? "Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love."¹² Why let the figments of your imagination run wild? Why keep asking yourself, "What is God? What's he like?" Whatever notion you may concoct, he's not that. What he is, your mind could never comprehend. But, by way of foretaste, you read that "God is love." If you ask what love is, it's the force that draws us toward the good—toward ineffable good, boundless good, the good which creates all other goods. You're under the spell of goodness, since it gives you everything you find pleasing. (I'm not talking about sin, of course, because sin is the one thing you don't owe to goodness. Everything else, however, springs from goodness.)

⁸ Ps 138:6 ⁹ Ps 34:19 ¹⁰ see Lk 18:9–14 ¹¹ Ph 4:5–6 ¹² 1 Jn 4:8

§3. You're under its spell, I said, because the Creator's goodness is what gives you everything that delights you. Again, please don't imagine I'm including sin, and don't say, "Sin gives me pleasure. So sin is from God."

First of all, is it really the sin that gives you pleasure? Isn't it, rather, something else, by means of which you commit that sin? Yes, your sin results from the fact that you have a disordered liking for some created good—a liking which is contrary to the honest and licit use of that created good, and is therefore opposed to the will and to the law of the Creator himself. Strictly speaking, it's not that you love sin, but that, loving something disorderedly, you fall into sin. You pursue the bait dangling from the line and, without realizing it, you swallow the sin.

You even go so far as to defend it. "If it's sinful to drink too much," you ask, "why did God create wine? If it's a sin to love gold—and I do love gold, but not the Creator—why did he make something we're forbidden to love?" And so on, and so on, concerning everything which you love improperly and which, therefore, begets all evil, all crime. Stop and think, and you'll see that everything God created is good: only your perverse use of it is sinful.

Listen closely now. You ask, "Why did God create things I mustn't love? If he hadn't made them in the first place, and then forbidden me to love them, I wouldn't run the risk of loving them and thereby damning myself."

Ah, suppose these creatures could speak—these created things which you love wrongly because you don't truly love yourself. If only they could, they'd reply: "What? You wish God hadn't created us, just so you wouldn't face the danger latent in loving us? How evil of you! Your own words reveal how very sinful you are. God is above you, and you're glad he created you; but you also wish he hadn't made anything else that was good. What he made for you is good, but there are other good things also—things great and small, things earthly, spiritual, temporal—all of them good, however, because they've all been produced by him

who is goodness itself. That's why a passage in Sacred Scripture pleads: 'Strengthen me ... for I am faint with love.'¹³ God made you good; but, beneath himself and beneath you, he also made things which are less good. Be subject to him and, since you rank above his artifacts, don't forsake the higher things for the lower. Remain upright so as to become worthy of praise, for 'all those whose heart is upright will be lauded.'¹⁴ Where does sin come from if not from your improper use of what was meant to serve you? So, use the things of earth appropriately, and you'll enjoy those of heaven eternally."

§4. Listen now, and, based on what you've just heard, examine your attitude toward yourself and the things you deal with every day.

Let's assume you're a big merchant. So tell me: if, with regard to some contract, you preferred silver to gold, lead to silver, and dust to lead, wouldn't your associates think you were out of your mind? Wouldn't they oust you from the company on the grounds that you were ruining them and needed to have your head fixed? Indeed, what else could they conclude after hearing you say, "Silver's worth more than gold"? Wouldn't they shout, "You're all wet, you idiot! You'll ruin yourself and us if you value silver over gold!"

And yet no one will say, "You're destroying yourself by preferring gold to God"...

"How," you ask, "do I prefer gold to God? If I were foolish enough to prize silver over gold, my partners would justifiably consider me mad because, of two things which I see equally well as I hold them in my hand and examine them, I somehow choose the one that's less valuable. Now, do I prefer gold to God? Well, I can see the gold, but I can't see God."

That's no excuse. Why do you love silver? "Because it's worth a lot." And why do you prefer gold? "Because it's worth even more." Granted that silver is precious, and gold more so, still God is love itself.

¹³ Sg 2:4 ¹⁴ Ps 64:11

§5. To prove that you prefer gold to God, let me mention one of his blessings—sight. You see gold, but you don't see God; and, obviously, everyone prefers what he can see to what he can't. What do you say to that?

Now, is faithfulness gold? Is it silver? Is it money or cattle or land? Is it heaven? It's none of those things; yet it is something—and not only something, but something great. (I don't mean the supernatural faithfulness whence we get the term “the faithful,” that lets you approach the Lord's table and repeat with faith the words of our Faith. For the moment, I'm putting that kind of faithfulness aside.)

What I want to discuss is that other quality which also is commonly called faithfulness—not the faithfulness God enjoins upon you, but the one you demand of your slave. I mention it because the Lord demands it of you too, requiring that you deceive no one, that you be honest in your dealings, loyal to your wife, and so on. Yes, your God commands you to practice that sort of faithfulness also.

Now exactly what is it? Surely, you can't see it; and if you can't see it, how can you complain when someone is unfaithful toward you? Your very complaint proves that you do see it. Earlier you asked, “How do I prefer gold to God? I can see gold, but I can't see God.” You can see gold, but you can't see faithfulness. Or can't you? You see it when you demand it of others; but when they demand it of you, you don't want to see it. With your eyes wide open, you shout, “Honor your pledge to me”; but with your eyes shut tight, you claim, “I didn't promise anything.” In both cases, unjust man, open your eyes. Sacrifice injustice, not faithfulness; give your neighbor what you insist on for yourself.

§6. Having decided to free your slave, you lead him to church, where, amid the silence, your certificate of emancipation (or some other proof of your intent) is read aloud. You declare that you're setting him free because he has proved faithful to you in all matters. That fidelity is

what you appreciate, what you're honoring, what you're rewarding with freedom. You're doing all you can: making a man free at least, since you can't make him immortal.

God, however, cries out against you, and uses your servant to convict you. Deep in your heart he whispers, "You brought your slave from your house into mine, and you want to lead him back from mine into yours as a free man. But you—why do you serve me so badly in my house? You're giving your slave what you can; I promise you what *I* can. You're setting him free because he's been faithful to you; I make you immortal if you're faithful to me. Why do you keep rationalizing against me in your heart? Do for your Lord what you praise your slave for doing on your behalf. Would you be so arrogant as to deem yourself worthy of having a faithful slave in someone you bought, while I wouldn't deserve to have a faithful servant in the man I created?"

Your Lord speaks to you thus, interiorly, where none but you can hear him. And he who speaks to you thus always tells the truth. Could anything be more justified than this message of his? Don't block your ears! You prize loyalty in your slave, though surely you can't see it. Why do you admire it—as long as it resides in someone else? Why love it in a slave whom you've purchased with money, but whom you haven't created?

God's conduct toward you is based on a two-fold right: he created you, and he redeemed you. "Before you were," he says, "I created you, and when you sold yourself under the yoke of sin, I redeemed you."

To affranchise your slave, you destroy the document of ownership which attested his servitude. God, however, doesn't destroy the tablets that spell out his rights and your duties. Those tablets are the Gospel itself, together with the blood which has redeemed you. And they're both present here in this church, to be contemplated every day, reminding you of your status and of the ransom paid to set you free.

§7. Suppose your slave, after being freed, didn't remain faithful but, instead, proved unworthy of the favor bestowed on him. Let's say you caught him doing some misdeed in your very house. Oh, how you'd yell and scream! "Wicked servant," you'd shout, "you're no longer loyal to me! Have you forgotten that I bought you? Don't you realize I shed my blood for you?" You'd yell at the top of your lungs, you'd rattle the heavens with your complaints and reproaches: "I've given my blood for you, you evil servant!" And everyone within hearing distance would agree: "Yes, that's true."

Wouldn't you be embarrassed, though, if he dared brave your wrath and rebut you by asking, "What blood did you ever shed for me? When you bought me, they didn't even puncture a vein. It's your money you're talking about, and you love it to the point of calling it your very blood."

Your Lord God now uses your own words to condemn you: "You say your money is your blood. You demand that your servant be true to you because you bought him by paying out, not blood, but money or gold. Recall what I gave for you. Read the tablets." Yes, and if you don't remember, read about your Savior's death—the nails, the lance, the price he paid to redeem you. Anyone can have a vein opened, donate a bit of blood, and go on living. But your Savior is speaking about a great deal more: "While I was still alive, they didn't draw only a few drops of my blood. I bought you back with every single drop of it, and paid for you with my death."

What do you reply to that? Give your Savior the fidelity you require of your servant. You see gold. Can't you see fidelity also? If you really couldn't see it, would you exact it? Would you prize it so? Would you reward it with freedom? True, you see gold with the eyes of the flesh, and loyalty with the eyes of the heart. But to the degree that the eyes of the heart are superior, so, too, is what you see with them.

And still you prefer gold to the faithfulness your Lord wants from you...

Claiming “You didn’t give me anything,” you don’t repay what you were loaned. Or, though you yourself haven’t loaned anything, you scream, “Give me back what I loaned you!” You don’t return what you’ve received, yet you demand what you haven’t handed out. Well, go ahead and acquire gold that way, pile up all sorts of goods, amass a fortune; but when your cash boxes overflow and you’re swimming in gold, look into your heart, and you’ll find that the treasure of faithfulness is no longer there.

§8. If you’ve felt some stirring in your soul, if you’ve blushed with shame, if you’ve corrected what was monstrous and depraved about your behavior, come back! Come back, and rejoice in the Lord; find your delight in him. To rejoice in the Lord, rejoice in what he commands. Rejoice in faith, rejoice in hope, rejoice in love. Rejoice in compassion and hospitality and chastity. All these virtues are gains, the treasures of the inner man, the pearls stored, not in your strongbox, but in your conscience. Cherish the possession of such treasures. You can’t lose them in a shipwreck; and after swimming away from it, though you’ve lost all else, you won’t be any less wealthy, for you’ll be escaping with the upright heart which deserves so much praise. Nor will you complain to your Lord because accidents have befallen you in this world; you’ll even bless the rod of the Father from whom you await your inheritance.

Take refuge in those hands which correct you. Don’t dodge punishment, for he who administers it can’t be mistaken. He who created you knows what he still has to do with you. Do you think he’s so incompetent that, after making you, he has forgotten what remains to be done? If he hadn’t thought about you even before giving you existence, you simply wouldn’t be here. And now that you do exist, that you’re alive and serving him, do you imagine he’d scorn you or abandon you?

You object, “He *has* abandoned me! I’ve prayed to him, and he hasn’t answered me.” Ah, but suppose you were asking for something you’d receive only to your detriment... “I’ve wept at his feet, but he hasn’t given me what I wanted.” Unthinking child, what was it you wanted? To taste the pleasures of this passing world? What if those pleasures which you begged for so vehemently, so tearfully—what if they meant your damnation?

Earlier we spoke about your servant. Now let’s draw another comparison—this time, with your son. He’s small, and he keeps crying so you’ll let him ride your horse. Do you listen to him? Be honest: do you? Of course not! So, are you being hard-hearted or kind? Tell me why you refuse. Clearly, you’re acting out of love, and no one would doubt it. You’re planning to leave him your entire fortune once he’s grown up; but now when he’s young and teary, you won’t hoist him up on your horse. Everything you possess is for him—the house with all that’s in it, the fields with all that’s in them; yet you won’t allow this pathetic little child to ride your horse. He can cry his eyes out, he can sob himself to sleep, but you won’t yield. And that’s because you’re being good to him. If you gave in, you’d be cruel.

Look at your case now. Isn’t that exactly how God acts toward you when you implore him for something harmful but don’t obtain it? Isn’t it because your lack, your need, will foster amendment, whereas the abundance you hanker for would corrupt you? You have to experience want for your instruction. Leave everything in God’s hands: he knows what to give you, and what to take away. If he granted your ill-considered requests, he could be responding out of anger, as happened under the Law when the Israelites longed to satisfy their fleshly desires, and God, in his wrath, catered to them.¹⁵ Conversely, though Paul pleaded “three times over to be delivered from a thorn in the flesh,”

¹⁵ see Ex 16–17

God in his goodness didn't answer him but declared: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."¹⁶

§9. Therefore rejoice in the Lord—in the Lord, I say, not in the world. Remember the ancient personage in Scripture who rejoiced in the Lord. Having lost all earthly joys, he still had the Lord with his heavenly joys. Amid all sorts of trials and tribulations, he preserved the pure, perfect, unshakeable joy of his heart. He possessed his goods without being possessed by them, for he belonged to the Lord. Scorning them, he clung to God; and when deprived of the things on which he trampled, he remained firmly established where he was. That's what rejoicing in the Lord means.

"The Lord has given." It's the Lord who is our joy. "The Lord has taken away." But has he taken himself away? No, he has taken what he gave in the first place, but this Giver has also given his very self, and hence we rejoice in him. "The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away. As it has pleased the Lord, so has he done. Blessed be the name of the Lord!"¹⁷

You can easily think of Job as adding, "How could what pleases the Lord displease his servant? I've lost my gold, lost my family, my herds—everything I had. But I haven't lost him who gave it all to me. I've lost the gifts, but not the Giver. I belong to him for ever; he's my joy, my wealth."

Why does Job speak this way? Because he's not looking at things upside down. He hasn't turned away from the One who's above, and bestowed his love on what's below. That would've constituted topsy-turviness—the wrong use of created things.

§10. Why blame the One who gave you your gold, when you should be blaming yourself for loving it inordinately? The Lord says, "Take this gold which I'm giving you, and make good use of it. Instead of

¹⁶ 2 Co 12:7–9 ¹⁷ Jb 1:21

adorning yourself with it, you should adorn it. Instead of hoping to derive honor and beauty from it, your way of living should beautify your gold and not bring disgrace upon it.”

Immoralists, fornicators and debauchees wallow in gold, splurge on extravagant feasts, and lavish preposterous gifts on entertainers, but give nothing to the starving poor. Such wastrels don’t beautify gold. Rather, when you consider their behavior rightly, you sigh, “What a shame to see all that gold squandered! If only it were mine...”

Well, if it were yours, what would you do with it? “I’d feed the hungry, I’d take in strangers, clothe the naked, and ransom captives.” You speak wisely—before having that gold. See to it, though, that you act accordingly if and when you actually do have it. If you perform all the good deeds you’ve just mentioned, your gold will be a true ornament for you; and if—loving the Creator of gold more than the gold itself—if, I say, you use it as judiciously as you now plan to, you’ll prove to be an upright person, loving what’s above before all else, and making proper use of what’s here below. You’ll rejoice in the Lord. Being right-minded, you’ll find your delight in him. Your Creator won’t accuse you, and your Redeemer will give you thanks.

Sermon 28

God Is All to All

§1. From the treasury of divinely inspired texts, let's focus, with God's help, on the one we've just heard: "Rejoice, O hearts that seek the Lord!"¹ This meditation will be timely because we're still fasting, and our heart will rejoice in proportion as our soul is famished.



When the servants bring savory platters to the table, the hungry guests beam with delight. A fine painting's subtle colors and deft brush strokes rivet the eyes of someone who appreciates the glow of beauty. Dulcet harmonies soothe the ear that's attuned to them, and sweet fragrances gratify our sense of smell. So, too, may "hearts that seek the Lord rejoice."

§2. There's no question but that each of our senses is pleasantly affected by its proper object. Thus, sound can't thrill the eye, nor color beguile the ear. For the, human heart, however, God is at one and the same time light, harmony, fragrance and food. And if he's all that, it's because he's none of it; and if he's none of it, that's because it has all been created by him. He's the light of our heart, and so we sing: "In your light we see light."² He's the music of our heart: "Let me hear the sound of joy and gladness."³ He's also a fragrance in our heart; "We

¹ Ps 105:3 ² Ps 36:10 ³ Ps 51:8

are the aroma of Christ for God.”⁴ If fasting makes us feel the need for food, then “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,”⁵ since Christ Jesus, it is written, “has become for us our very wisdom and righteousness.”⁶

Such is the table spread before us: Jesus himself, our never-failing holiness, which no servant needs to season, and no trade ship needs to transport like some exotic fruit from beyond the seas. This is the food which pleases healthy palates—the food of the inner man. Pointing to himself, Jesus declared: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven.”⁷ This food nourishes without ever being exhausted, is consumed but never used up, satisfies our hunger yet never runs short.

When you get back home this morning, you’ll find no such food on your table. So, since you’re present at this banquet, eat as is fitting; but, afterwards, be sure to digest this food properly. One eats well but digests poorly if he hears God’s word without putting it into practice. In so doing, he doesn’t benefit from its nutritional value but rejects it scornfully as something bitter and indigestible.

§3. Don’t be surprised that our heart can derive nourishment from this food without lessening its potency. Hasn’t God provided similar food for your eyes? Light, in point of fact, is the nourishment of the eyes; and if they live in darkness too long, they suffer from having “fasted,” as it were. You’ve heard of people losing their eyesight because they were kept in constant darkness. No images had registered in their eyes, no faces, nothing outside of them, not even dust or smoke. When finally they emerged from their endless night, they couldn’t see as they did before: their eyes had died of starvation, from lack of nourishment—that is, from not having seen light.

Now, here’s what I wanted to explain to you: the nature of the light on which our eyes feed. We can all see light; everyone’s eyes thrive on

⁴ 2 Co 2:15 ⁵ Mt 5:6 ⁶ 1 Co 1:30 ⁷ Jn 6:51

it. Though it serves as food for sight, it loses absolutely nothing in the process. Two people see it, yet it remains whole and entire; crowds see it, yet it stays unchanged. A rich man sees it, and so does a beggar, but it is equally itself for both of them. No one can restrict it; it enriches the poor, but isn't the object of the wealthy man's avarice. Do the rich see more? Can their gold purchase additional light and thus reduce the pauper's supply? If the nourishment for our eyes is like this, what must God be for our souls?

§4. Another illustration. The ear thrives on sound. And what is sound? (I pose the question because physical things can help us understand intelligible ones.) Here I am, then, addressing your charity; your ears and your souls are open. Ah—I've just named two things: "ears" and "souls"; and each of those two words also contains two things: sound and thought. Both of them fly forth and reach your ears simultaneously; but the sound stops there, while the thought descends into your soul.

Let's consider the sound first, though the thought is far more important—sound being like the body, and thought like the soul. Immediately after striking the air and reaching the ear, a sound dies, never to return, never to be heard again. For the syllables which produce it follow one another so rapidly that we hear the second only after the first has gone by. Still, what a marvel is something which passes so quickly! Now, if I gave you a loaf of bread to relieve your hunger, you wouldn't all get the entire loaf; you'd share it, and each of you would receive less, depending on how numerous you are. When I speak to you, however, you don't have to share the syllables; you don't have to slice up the homily, and give a piece to this person, and another piece to his neighbor, so that everyone may have a bite of what I'm saying. No, everything is heard by one listener and by two, by a small group and by the whole congregation. One homily suffices for all, and each

individual receives it in its entirety. Your ear wants to listen, and your neighbor's ear doesn't deprive you of anything.

If speech, which is but a noise, produces such a wonder, what must the almighty Word of God accomplish! My voice rings in every ear, each of you possesses it entirely, and I don't need to have as many voices as you have ears. A single voice suffices for many ears, and, without dividing itself, fills each of them. That's how you should think concerning the Word of God—whole and entire in heaven, whole and entire here on earth, whole and entire among the angels, whole and entire in the bosom of his Father, whole and entire in the bosom of the Virgin Mary, whole and entire in eternity, whole and entire in his body, whole and entire when he descended into hell, and whole and entire as he led the repentant thief into paradise. Enough concerning sound.

§5. Now a word about thought, which is far inferior to the Word of God. I produce a sound; but after projecting it, I no longer possess it. If want to continue being heard, I must produce another sound, then another and another—or lapse into silence.

With regard to thought, however, I communicate it to you and I keep it at the same time; you possess what you've heard, and I don't lose what I've said. Consider now how right it is that "hearts which seek the Lord should rejoice," for the Lord is truth itself. My thought remains in my mind and, without leaving, enters into yours. But in order to transmit it to you, I need a sort of vehicle—sound. So I take this vehicle, load my thought onto it (as it were), take it out, steer it and lead it all the way over to you without abandoning it.

Now, if my thought can do that with my voice, can't the Word of God do as much with his body? And in fact, so as to come all the way down to us, the Word of God—who is God and lives in the bosom of God, that divine Wisdom who dwells immutably in the bosom of the Father—the Word of God, I repeat, chose a body, just as a thought

chooses a sound; he placed himself in that body and came down to us without leaving his Father.



Understand, savor what you've just heard, meditate on the grandeur and the wonder of it, and think ever loftier thoughts concerning God. God is greater than any light, greater than any music, greater than any thought. We must desire God, yearn for him with love, and so experience the joy of the hearts that seek him.

Sermon 34

A Prayer to the Holy Spirit

§1. Holy Spirit, my God, I want to speak about you, and yet I hesitate, since I am not qualified. Could I, in fact, say anything but what you inspire me to say? Could I utter a single word unless you come into me, in order to take my place and speak to yourself about yourself?

Begin, then, by giving yourself to me, O generous Benefactor, O perfect Gift, for you are mine. Nothing can belong to me, nor can I belong to myself, unless I first possess you. Be mine, and thus I shall be my own as well as yours. If I do not possess you, I shall possess nothing.

In whose estimation would I have the right to possess you? In no one's but yours. You must, therefore, give yourself to me so that I may become your property. Predispose me, then, prepare my soul to receive you; and, once you've entered into it, speak to yourself for me and listen to yourself within me. Yes, listen to yourself rather than to me, O you who are so kind! Listen for once, and do not get annoyed. See what inspires my words, since I really do not know, though I realize full well that without your help I cannot say a single thing.

I remember, though, how your grace once sufficed to turn an adulterous murderer into a psalmist; how you rescued innocent young Susanna; how you looked upon a woman possessed by seven demons, upon Magdalen, and filled her with such overflowing love that she became the apostle to the Apostles; how you visited Dismas as he hung upon his cross, and how—that very day—you opened heaven for him to rejoice

in the glory of Christ. Under your influence, Peter the apostate wept tears of repentance, and you prepared him to serve as supreme pontiff. Was it not at your prompting that a tax collector became an evangelist? And did you not unhorse the persecutor who, back on his feet again, became an outstanding teacher of the faith?

God of all holiness, when I ponder how you inspired all these people, their example encourages me to speak to you like this. And I know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that you have taught me to respond the same way they did. That, too, is why I long for you and throw myself into your arms. Hear me, O unbounded Goodness, and may your miserable creature not incur your wrath!

If I have sinned more than all these people who exemplify your many mercies, still your leniency—being infinite—far and away surpasses my guilt. You can forgive hundreds of thousands of sins just as easily as one. Here, for instance, is a man who, because of a single mortal sin, is marked for damnation upon leaving this world; and here is another who, despite thousands of sins, is saved by God as being predestined to eternal life. What does that mean, O gentlest Spirit? It means that in one instance you manifest your mercy, and in the other your justice. Here again are two men, vastly different from each other, but both with a long history of enormous crimes. When their world comes to an end, both are equally destined—one to enter into eternal life, and the other to plunge into horrific torments. What can we learn from this, O God full of goodness? That, in such matters, your limitless mercy is always whole and entire, and always true to itself, though it acts in diverse ways. A small number of sins does not guarantee entrance into eternal life any more than a large number of serious sins should lead to despair.

But because your mercy is preferable to any life style, I invoke it, I desire it and find solace in clinging to it. Give yourself to me through your mercy, and grant me your mercy through yourself, so that I may possess it in you, and that it may serve you as a pathway to come to me.

Your mercy is what inspires me to speak to you courageously and confidently. It makes my soul rise above itself. And in possessing your mercy, I possess you. I therefore ask for nothing but you, since you are both teacher and knowledge, both doctor and remedy, love and lover, life and protector of life.

What remains to be said? You are everything we call good. For if we have not been annihilated, that is because of your leniency. It alone sustains us while patiently waiting for us; it alone preserves us by not condemning, calls us back without upbraiding, releases us without judging, grants us grace and does not take it back, and saves us through its persistence.

§2. O my sinful soul, get up, stand straight, pay attention to these consoling thoughts, and do not reject the help which can assist you so mightily in reforming yourself. And always remember that the Holy Spirit is the only person you need for that task. So, let every fiber of your being rise; and, since your salvation resides in this person alone, consecrate all your powers to him, prepare yourself to serve as his dwelling place, and receive him so that he may receive you in turn.

Come, then, sweetest Spirit; extend your sacred finger to help me get up. May it come ever closer and draw me to you, as it touches my wounds and heals them. May it remove the swelling of my pride, clear the rot of my anger, purge the ravages of poisonous envy, cut away the dead skin of apathy, soothe the ache of cupidity and greed, drive out superfluity and gluttony, and replace the infection of lust with the fragrant aromas of the most perfect continence. Yes, O God full of goodness, touch me with the finger that pours wine, oil and purest myrrh on my wounds. Then will all my corruption disappear, as I return to my earlier innocence.

As a result, when you come to live in me (who at present am only a torn sack), you will find a dwelling in good condition, founded on the

truth of faith, built with the certitude of hope, and crowned with the glow of ardent charity.

Though we sinners have not desired you for very long, come, lovable Guest. Yes, come! Stay with us; for, unless you do, it will grow late and the day will draw to a close.¹ Knock, and open the door; for if you open it, no one will close it; come in and shut it behind you, so that no one may then open it.² All your possessions are secure,³ and there can be no peace without you—you, repose for laborers, peace for combatants, joy for the suffering, consolation for the sick, refreshment for those oppressed by the heat, happiness for the afflicted, light for the blind, guide for those harrowed by doubt, and courage for the timid. Indeed, no one experiences tranquility unless he labors for you, nor peace unless he does battle for you. To suffer for your sake is the height of happiness, and to weep for you is supreme consolation—so much so that, in moaning for you, my soul (after a manner of speaking!) would seem to be surrendering to “vice” and “delights.” Ineffable Goodness, you cannot bear to see us suffer, to see us weep and toil because of you; for, at one and the same moment, both labor and rest begin, both war and peace, both sorrow and happiness. Thus, to be in you is to be in eternal bliss.

§3. O my Beloved, touch my soul. Touch this soul which you created and then chose as your abode on the day of my baptism. Alas, you have a thousand times been shamefully, outrageously evicted from this house which belongs to you fully and entirely! But now your wretched guest is calling you back with loud cries because he realizes that your absence is the worst of evils.

Come back, O kindly Spirit; take pity on this traitor who has driven you out. Now—oh! yes, now—I vividly recall the happiness I tasted when you were present. With you, I had everything that was good.⁴

¹ cf. Lk 24:29 ² cf. Rv 3:7 ³ cf. Lk 11:21 ⁴ cf. Ws 7:11

As soon as you left, however, my enemies robbed me and took all the treasures you had brought for me; and, not content with impoverishing me so, they beat and wounded me, leaving me half-dead.⁵

So come back, beloved Lord; come once again into your own home, before your demented guest draws his last breath. Today I see, today I understand how miserable I am, living apart from you. Even though I blush with shame and confusion because you are far away, still the unspeakable weaknesses occasioned by your absence force me to call you back.

Precious Guardian, return to the house of the wretched Martha whom I have become; and keep me in the truth, lest I someday fall asleep in death and my enemy boast, “I have prevailed!”⁶ With your help, I will trust in your mercy, latch onto it, place all my hope in it. It will be my portion, my inheritance;⁷ and, accordingly, I will not fear what mortal man can do to me.⁸

It is impossible for you to withhold your mercy from me, for mercy and you are consubstantial. See how poor I am, how dire my needs; and have pity on me, not according to my sinfulness, but according to your infinite greatness. May your compassion prove that it ranks above all your works.⁹ Let not the malice of sin outweigh the greatness of your mercy. Leniency is what makes you declare: “I take no pleasure in the death of sinners, but rather in their conversion, so that they may live.”¹⁰ For you desire “mercy, not sacrifice.”¹¹

Most generous Benefactor, stretch forth your right hand—that sacred hand which is never empty, does not know how to refuse, and always gives to those in need. Yes, beloved Benefactor, extend that hand, so full of your gifts: it is the hand of the poor. Give this poor man of yours—or, rather, give to poverty itself—those weapons or treasures that enrich the poor yet leave them nothing to fear. Complete, O Lord,

⁵ cf. Lk 10:30 ⁶ Ps 12:5 ⁷ cf. Ps 16:5–6 ⁸ cf. Ps 56:5 ⁹ cf. Ps 145:9–10 ¹⁰ Ezk 33:11 ¹¹ Mt 9:13

what your right arm has begun.¹² For I clearly see that if you save us, it is not because we have performed righteous deeds, but because you are merciful.¹³

Therefore, most holy Communication, grant me the gift of piety, whose role is to inspire gentleness as well as to preserve us from any attachment to worldly goods. Thus shall we be able to say, like the Apostle Peter: “We have given up everything and followed you.”¹⁴

As soon as we have renounced the things of this passing world, your salvific influence will guide us over level ground¹⁵ directly to the land of the living.¹⁶ And through the loving devotion which it inspires, it will usher us into that blessed abode where we shall delight in you for all eternity. Amen.

¹² cf. Ps 68:29 ¹³ cf. Tt 3:5 ¹⁴ Mt 19:27 ¹⁵ cf. Ps 143:10 ¹⁶ cf. Ps 142:6

Sermon 46

Zacchaeus

§1 In today's Gospel¹ we just heard the story of Zacchaeus, which makes us admire his excellent attitude as well as the boundless generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree to compensate for being so short he wouldn't see the Savior passing by. He wanted to contemplate the features of the One whom he already loved deep in his heart, to see with his own eyes the One whom he'd only pictured in his mind. So there he stood in the tree, though he already sensed that Christ Jesus would offer himself as a victim on another tree—the tree of the cross. Zacchaeus looked at the Lord drawing closer, but he himself was being looked at even more searchingly by the Savior who wasn't afraid to offer him what he didn't dare request.

The divine majesty looked at him and said, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately, for I must stay at your house today.” Having already entered into that heart, Jesus would now enter into that house, where he found Zacchaeus preparing a spiritual feast, admired his faith, and proposed it as a model for everyone in attendance.

§2 What a joy for blessed Zacchaeus! As host, he now possessed the Lord, a mere glimpse of whom had given him such happiness earlier. But let's admire the gift he offered his guest for being there: “Lord, I'll

¹ Lk 19:1-10

give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I've defrauded anyone of anything, I'll pay him back four times as much."

Zacchaeus was offering everything he possessed. What amazing devotion! What astonishing reparation! He divided his entire fortune into two parts: one to perform works of mercy, the other to right all the wrongs he'd committed as chief tax collector. He didn't want to keep any dishonestly acquired wealth, so that, when appearing before the judgment seat of Christ, he'd receive a more favorable verdict, be forgiven his sins of injustice, and reap the glory promised for works of mercy. We shouldn't wonder, then, that Jesus praised him, his faith, and his generosity, declaring: "Today salvation has come to this house, and this man is truly a son of Abraham." Through faith, that home received the salvation it had lost through fraud.

§3 Praise God and quake with joy, Zacchaeus, for you merited this blessing by climbing up the sycamore tree. (Quite rare here in Africa, sycamores produce fruit not unlike our wild figs.)

So, then, why did Zacchaeus see Christ Jesus? Because he didn't fear the shame associated with the cross. A God hanging from the cross, a God crucified—that's folly in the eyes of men. But for Zacchaeus, it was an object of wonder, "for the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."²

Zacchaeus became a son of Abraham by faith, not race; by merit, not birth; by devotion, not blood. It all began with a burning desire to see the Lord, and he did. That's how "Abraham, your father, rejoiced that he was to see my day. He saw it and was glad."³

Like Abraham, Zacchaeus received the Lord, though Abraham received him with angels, and Zacchaeus received him with the Apostles. In Abraham's day, the Lord was headed for Sodom, but now he was crisscrossing Judea. The divine blessing granted Abraham a son, whereas that same blessing enrolled Zacchaeus himself among Abraham's children.

² 1 Co 1:25 ³ Jn 8:56

Abraham offered his son to the Lord; Zacchaeus offered his fortune. Abraham gave God his heir; Zacchaeus gave his heritage. Abraham was ready to immolate the pledge he'd received guaranteeing his promised posterity; Zacchaeus offered the substance of his patrimony. Zacchaeus wished first of all to share his patrimony with Christ Jesus, and that's when he was proclaimed a son of Abraham's. If he deserved praise for sharing his inheritance with Jesus before receiving his reward, what must he have felt when he found himself justified and redeemed by the blood of Christ!

§4 Dear brothers, after hearing my words, you have only to imitate this beautiful model. If you want to belong to your Father, do like Zacchaeus, and you'll merit what he merited. Similar deeds call for similar rewards, and true sonship erases the difference between deeds; but two persons wouldn't bear the same name if their deeds were diametrically opposite. How can you assume a name which neither your works nor your nature authenticates? How can you flatter yourself with the title of "son" when you don't prove sonship by your faith, your origin, or your family? Zacchaeus deserved the name by the grace of God because his will was conformed to God's.

In his generosity, God enables you to become his sons because you can will to do so. From what you have, give to people who have nothing. And let no one exempt himself by saying, "I have neither gold nor silver."⁴ Reject such empty pretexts, for a small donation will earn you a magnificent reward. By giving a bit of bread to someone who's hungry, or a little water to one who's thirsty—provided you do so in the name of the Lord—you'll be entitled to the same reward as Zacchaeus.

⁴ Ac 3:6

Sermon 48

On Judging Oneself

§1. We've just heard the teachings of Sacred Scripture, which were given to us as a topic for discussion. We, your clergy, must ponder them with the help of him who "holds both us and our words in his hand,"¹ and then sow our gleanings for a fruitful crop in your hearts. Elsewhere it's written: "I shall praise God for his words, and glorify the Lord for his thoughts." We glorify what God gives us, for, despite our weakness, we're like vessels consecrated to his service: we receive according to our capacity, and we communicate it to you without envy. May he compensate for what's lacking in us, since what we present to you is nothing unless he himself does everything your souls need.

§2. Recall with me now what the prophet recommended in the first reading: "What shall I offer the Lord which is worthy of him?" This man was wondering with what kind of sacrifice he could placate God and find favor with him. "Shall I bow down low before God most high? Shall I come before him with holocausts, with year-old calves? Will he be pleased with thousands of rams or myriad streams of oil? Shall I give him my first-born to expiate my crimes—the very fruit of my body for the sins of my soul?"

In reply he hears: "O man!" Now, who answers "O man" if not the Creator of man? And this particular man, wondering how to appease

¹ Ws 7:16

God and win his favor, is told: “You have been taught what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to practice judgment and justice, to love mercy, and to walk with the Lord your God.”²

You asked what you could offer. Offer your very self. Do you imagine the Lord wants something other than that? Among bodily creatures, is there anything better? No; and if he’s asking you for yourself again, it’s because you were lost to him. Do as he commands, and he’ll find that you possess both judgment and justice—judgment in regard to yourself, and justice in regard to your neighbor.

In what does judgment with regard to yourself consist? In not loving what you were, so that you may now become what you weren’t before; in considering yourself objectively, neither excusing your faults nor loving them because they’re your handiwork; and, finally, in not praising yourself for whatever good resides in you, and not blaming God for the ills that plague you.

Otherwise, your judgment would be skewed and, therefore, be no judgment at all. To show us that it simply isn’t a judgment, God doesn’t say: “I want you to exercise right judgment,” but only: “to exercise judgment.” If it’s right, it’s a judgment pure and simple; if not, it’s a crime.

What were you doing when you were losing your soul, courting damnation, running farther and farther away? Speak up: what were you doing? I’ll tell you. You were boasting of the good in yourself, and blaspheming God for the woes that beset you. That’s an unjust judgment and, therefore—as I’ve already said—no judgment at all.

Would you now want to deliver a just judgment: a judgment, period? You need only do the opposite: simply correct yourself. What does that mean? It means praising God for the good in you, and accusing yourself of the bad. If your faults truly displease you, and if you correct them with the help of him who created you, you’ll be a just doer of

² Mi 6:6–8

justice. If you're just, you'll love God. Unless you're evil and perverse, you'll not stray from the path of righteousness; and if you're righteous, you'll love everything that's right. As a result, you'll most certainly love God; for when you didn't love him, it was your perversity that didn't.

§3. Listen to this verse from Psalm 73: "How good God is to the upright, to those who are clean of heart!" Didn't the poet who wrote that find anything off-putting about God? Far be it from me to accuse him of that! Instead, I want to take him at his word. Listen again to what he says: "How good God is!" To whom is God so good? "To those who are clean of heart."

But then the psalmist explains: "As for me, I lost my balance; my feet almost slipped." By adding *almost*, he wants us to understand how close he came to succumbing, to falling. Let's ask him how he got into such a perilous situation. "Because," he confesses, "because I was envious of the arrogant when I saw how prosperous they were."³ Seeing them so happy, so well off, he faltered and nearly forsook his God—all because the wicked were so carefree.

§4. This shaken man began to wonder, "Does God really know about this? Is the Most High aware of what's going on?" Now hear what he adds; notice how his puzzlement and distress drove him to the brink of falling and losing his soul. He asked himself, "Is it for nothing that I've kept my heart clean, and washed my hands in innocence? Why? Only to see how devil-may-care the wealthy are, and how wretched I am? They bask in joy, while I cringe under the blows of misfortune. Yes, joy for those who blaspheme the Lord, and blows for me who adore him! Does God know? Does he care?" That's what shook his faith, what made him totter, and led him to question whether God cares about us humans.

³ Ps 73:1-3

§5. The psalmist brooded over these thoughts while his heart hadn't yet been set aright. Shocked by the contrast he'd observed, he began to think it unlikely that God even paid attention to our human concerns. So he wanted to speak up for all to hear. What deterred him, though, was the authority and the teaching of the saints. Notice what he says: "I planned to tell everyone that God is indifferent toward us and what we do. Then I suddenly realized one thing: had I spoken like the wealthy, I would have betrayed your people, O God. How, then, could I carry out my plan? What I wanted to say had never been said either by Moses or Abraham, by Isaac or Jacob, by Jeremiah, Isaiah or any other prophet. Yet all of them are your children, and I'd be condemning them if I spoke my mind.

§6. "So, what to do? I strove to discover the truth. But it's a vast and difficult undertaking to comprehend how, on the one hand, God is just and aware of the situation among his creatures, and, on the other hand, why the rich are jolly while the good are often unhappy. Is it just? That's what I'd like to fathom, but I have a lot of work ahead of me.

§7. "How long did my perplexity last? Till I entered the sanctuary of God and began to understand those people's end."⁴

Enter God's sanctuary, then, O faithful soul! Enter his sanctuary, O pious soul who don't condemn God when you're suffering and the wicked are prospering. You don't understand why things are the way they are. Trust, however, that there's no injustice in anything God does or allows to happen. Since your human mind has led you astray, let his authority bring you back, as you admit that there's something here you just can't comprehend. Indeed, you have to believe with the utmost certitude that God is neither evil nor unjust. Then, entering his sanctuary with this faith, with this belief, you'll soon understand.

⁴ Ps 73:17

Thus the psalmist continues: “Till I entered the sanctuary of God, which faith alone can penetrate. And what will come of this faith? It will enable me to understand their end.”

Oh, yes, may the last end come, when no evil man will be happy, and no good man unhappy; when the devout will be separated from the impious, the righteous from the unrighteous, those who praise God from those who blaspheme him; when, at last, the distinction will be so complete that—as I just said—no good man will weep, and no evil man rejoice. Why can’t that be so right now? Perhaps it is, but what’s hidden today will be unveiled tomorrow.

§8. Enter with me, if you can, into God’s sanctuary. Maybe I’ll manage to explain how... But no! Instead, learn—together with me—from him who teaches me.

Learn that the wicked aren’t happy, and that good people rejoice far more, even though neither group can yet experience supreme bliss or unutterable suffering.

Together with me, understand, before all else, that the wicked aren’t really happy. Tell me, I beg you, why even you aren’t. You’ll answer, “Because I’m needy, because I have problems, my body is racked with pain, and I worry on account of my enemies.”

So you’re unhappy because you have some evil to suffer, and still you consider that person happy who is himself evil. Isn’t there an enormous difference between suffering evil and being evil? You’re not the evil which you suffer, since you suffer from it though you aren’t evil. You suffer from evil without being evil, yet you imagine that the wicked don’t suffer from it though they are evil in themselves.

Make no mistake about it: it’s impossible for you to be unhappy though you’re suffering evil, and equally impossible for them to be happy when they are evil personified. Do you imagine that, being evil incarnate, they don’t suffer from evil? They have to endure themselves, don’t they? You suffer when some extraneous evil afflicts your body,

and still you think they don't suffer when they feel in their heart the evil which they themselves actually are? You suffer because your home looks shabby, and you assume they don't suffer because their soul is rotten?

Be good, all of you who possess goods. Wealth is good; so are gold and silver; so, too, large families and land. All those things are good—but only to do good with. In themselves, they don't make you any better.

Therefore, acquire such things as can make you good. You ask what they might be? Thinking straight, exercising judgment and being just—thus earning for your very selves a place among the good things which you own. Be open to the lessons they teach you: being immortal, become good amid all those perishable goods. Yes, be receptive to their teaching: shun evil, lest you do evil with them.

My brothers, we still need to examine how to practice justice and love mercy, and how each of us should be ready to walk with our Lord God. But, with the aid of heaven, we'll treat of these matters with you some other day. Just be sure of one thing: I don't want to tire you any longer, but only to help you as much as I can.

Sermon 65

On Doing Penance for Our Sins

§1. In the Gospel which was just read, we heard these words: “Repent and do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”¹ The kingdom of heaven is Jesus Christ, who can distinguish between the righteous and the reprobate, and pass judgment in all matters. Therefore, let’s avert God’s wrath by confessing our sins. Though still unsure exactly how to remedy them, let’s at least understand this truth: since we must expiate the causes of our negligence, doing penance is obligatory for us.

Consider, my brothers, what love the Lord our God has lavished on us, since he wants us to expiate our failings prior to appearing before his judgment seat, where we’d receive nothing but sheer justice. He warns us ahead of time, so that he won’t have to treat us according to his total, strictest equity. So if our God wants us to weep over our sins, it’s to help us recover through penitence what we’ve lost through negligence. God understands how unstable and frail our humanity is; he knows that our body is a frequent cause of sin, and that our conversations often massacre truth and charity. That’s why he prescribes penance: so that, through it, we may correct our failings and make reparation for our faults. Though we’re assured of his forgiveness, we shouldn’t be any the less anxious to make satisfaction. I realize that here below we’re exposed to many wounds, and yet no one should despair, for the Lord is infinitely merciful and all-powerful to heal our weaknesses.

¹ Mt 4:17

§2. Someone may claim he finds nothing in his soul to weep over. Still, let him probe his conscience, and he'll soon discover the undying memory of some sin. One man has been wounded in his heart, another in his body. One is driven by pride, another burns with desire for this or that. One has a problem with deceit, and another with avarice to the point of reducing his neighbor to poverty. One has shed his brother's blood, while another has defiled himself with prostitutes. Given such serious and numerous wounds of soul and body, how can a person find nothing to bemoan, nothing to weep over?

Don't be embarrassed to show God your wounds. If shame holds you back, you'll never find the remedy you need. Some ailments are easier to cure than others. So, too, some patients; but of all the sick, the most difficult to treat are surely those who don't want to be treated. Scripture itself attests to that: none of those who sought the required remedy perished, whereas those who spurned it were swallowed up by death.

Nineveh, for example, was threatened with destruction in forty days unless it did penance. Here's what Jonah prophesied: "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be destroyed!" ... When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, donned sackcloth, and sat on an ash heap."² This satisfaction for evil was most meritorious, my brothers. The king cast off his sumptuous garments and clothed himself in coarsest sackcloth, for he preferred saving himself in sackcloth than perishing in royal purple. Where was all his splendor then? To escape the penalty for his pride, he sought refuge in the arms of humility, teaching us that God prizes humility over might. Indeed, the kingdom of Nineveh was as good as overthrown if penitence hadn't come to protect it from heaven's punishment.

§3. One striking feature of the Ninevites' repentance is that fasting was imposed even upon the children and the animals. Now, why make

² Jon 3:4, 6

sinless children fast? Because their fasting earned salvation for the guilty. Mere children begged for forgiveness lest their elders perish. All well and good as far as the children were concerned, but why make the animals fast, too? So that the hunger they felt might bear stronger witness to the repentance of the humans; the lowing of the herds was to be like a prayer directed to heaven in order to bring mercy down upon the guilty.

My brothers, let us, too, establish a sacred harmony between our heart and our faith, so as to cry out more efficaciously to the Lord our God. The Ninevites begged for mercy after incurring guilt; as for us, let's wisely beg not to fall into sin. Blessed is he who is exempt from all punishment because he fears God, and who needs only to know God's law to do what's right. Wise enough to fear God's justice, he needn't fear retribution.

§4. Someone in the congregation may object: "Why should I be afraid, since I do no evil?" Listen to this text from St. John the Apostle: "If we say, 'We are without sin,' we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."³ Let no one fool you: the worst sin of all is failing to recognize one's sins. If we acknowledge them, we can be reconciled with God through penitence. Among sinners, however, those in the most worrisome state are the very ones who boast that they have nothing to worry about.

Many sins are trivialized, but they are nonetheless very dangerous precisely because they're not considered sins at all. The most seductive evil is the one that doesn't look evil.

I'm not talking about murder or adultery or solicitation. (God forbid that any Christian ever allow himself to be drawn into such crimes; but if he does succumb, may awareness of his guilt lead him to bewail it immediately.) No, I'm speaking of those other sins—those deemed much less serious. Who among you, for instance, can claim to be totally free of intemperance, of ambitiousness, jealousy, cupidity or avarice? That's why, in keeping with Holy Scripture, I exhort you to humble

³ 1Jn 1:8

yourselves under the mighty hand of God. Since no one is sinless, let no one excuse himself from doing penance, for by declaring himself innocent he would prove to be guilty. Perhaps we have only small sins; still, we are never sinless. “Can anyone be found who is clean of defilement? There is none.”⁴

§5. Therefore, let those who’ve sinned most grievously beg for forgiveness more insistently. And let those who have refrained from the most serious sins pray to be delivered from them altogether, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.

⁴ Jb 14:4

Sermon 66

On Fasting

§1. My brothers, whenever we designate fast days to foster your devotion, we make it our duty to exhort you to observe them faithfully. For, in point of fact, many among you are not sensual so much as lazy. Though not given over to the vices of the body, they lack devotion in their heart and thus seek to dispense themselves from fasting because of some debility or health problem which most often proves to be imaginary.

But even if it were real, they'd find the remedy for it precisely in fasting. Voluptuous living causes many an illness which fasting will cure. That's why our Lord urges us to counter all our evil tendencies with devout fasting. Furthermore, these fasts are presented to us in such a way that even the weak can hardly rule them out.

Let's listen as the prophet Joel addresses priests. "Proclaim a fast," he bids them, "and preach about healing."¹ Now, what is healing but medicine for the body? If doctors order patients to fast in order to heal their bodies, if fasting is the most effective remedy for listlessness, and if vice tends to keep weakening the sinner's constitution, then why not

¹ Jl 1:14. This quotation, like many in Augustine, differs from the readings we're familiar with. While we benefit from St. Jerome's Vulgate, Augustine used earlier versions, such as the *Vetus Latina*, and said he preferred the *Itala* to all others. In his *Retractions* (2, 12, 39) and in *Letter 71*, he admits: "I made incorrect interpretations because I used faulty translations." *Felices culpa!*—Translator's note.

look to legitimate fasting as a counterbalance to the weakness of the body, since these fasts are enjoined on us as a remedy for all the ills of both soul and body?

Let's reread Joel's words. "Proclaim a fast, and preach about healing. Gather the inhabitants of the earth in the house of the Lord your God. Cry out to him ceaselessly, and he will hear you." What can the slaves of their belly reply to that? Do you refuse to fast because you don't want your prayers to be granted? Why load your stomach with meat? Why stuff yourself with food and wine? Why, in the presence of people who fast, do you exhale the smell of your intemperance? That's a sign of illness, not digestion.

Fast for God, then, when he ordains it, lest your doctors be forced to put you on a diet; for, from their viewpoint as well as ours, fasting has a calming effect on our blood and our entire system.

§2. The philosophers, for their part, demand that disciples with superior minds fast to purify themselves of all the stains incurred by their flesh. By constraining the body, they strengthen the spirit. For us, fasting helps to perfect the soul. It atones for the faults burdening our conscience, it suppresses sin, and endows with splendor souls once besmirched with sin.

If, then, doctors and philosophers consider fasting to be a well-spring of health and wisdom, what must I say of you who pamper your stomach, feasting while the rest of the congregation fasts? St. Paul is targeting you when he states: "Food for the stomach, and the stomach for food!"² And this, too: "One goes hungry while another gets drunk... In this matter I do not praise you, because your meetings do more harm than good."³ To you again David addresses this scathing reproach: "With your hand, O Lord, slay them... Their bellies are filled with hidden things. They have gorged themselves on unclean meat, and have given

² 1 Co 6:13 ³ 1 Co 11:21, 17

their young what was left over. As for me, I shall satisfy myself with fasting, so that your glory may shine forth.”⁴

§3. Numerous facts will better attest to the precious effects of fasting. Moses, for example, fasted to receive God’s law and earned the privilege of conversing with him. During a drought Elijah fasted to appease God, and he obtained a saving rainfall. David’s fasting enabled him to escape ravenous lions. By fasting, the three children in the furnace proved how impotent the idols were. Whenever David fasted, he returned from battle victorious. The Ninevites appeased God’s anger and merited forgiveness by their fasting; fear of impending destruction inspired them to impose a fast even on their herds, and the Lord, moved by such proofs of repentance and atonement, spared their metropolis. (Who, my brothers, isn’t amazed to read that those animals did for humans what humans normally do for animals?) Christ Jesus, our sovereign Master, fasted in order to overcome Satan. And the apostles prepared to receive the Holy Spirit by fasting.

But why demonstrate the efficacy of fasts by listing only men, when women likewise furnish striking examples? Armed with fasting, Judith beheaded Holofernes. Fasting furnished Susanna with the means to confound the false witnesses. Queen Esther fasted to outsmart a persecutor and so saved her people.

Thus the Sacred Scriptures provide numerous examples of the wonders which resulted when fasting was observed, just as, on the other hand, they record the many misfortunes which ensued when it was violated. For example, Saul’s son, Jonathan, unaware that his father had decreed a total fast, ate the bit of honey he’d scraped out with a stick. Though involuntary, his crime affected the entire army and had to be avenged. If, then, Jonathan incurred guilt by unwittingly violating that fast, how much more culpable are those persons who knowingly scorn the fasts which they are commanded to observe!

⁴ Ps 17:14

§4. Therefore, my brothers, fast for fear that your disobedience may be deemed sacrilegious by our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Sermon 67

On Fasting

§1. “I cannot bear either your fasts or your festivals!”¹ Through these words of Isaiah’s, the Holy Spirit reprimands people who obstinately cling to their imperfections. The fasting which pleases the Most High consists not only in cutting down on food but also in cutting out all evil deeds. If you see to it that your soul doesn’t remain weighed down with sin and isn’t led astray by the allurements of vice, your fasts will be most acceptable to God.

On the other hand, you may exhaust yourself by depriving your body of sustenance, but if you hold on to your vices and persist in sinning, not only will you fail to please God, but you will positively fill him with disgust. Your fasts will please him only if you cleanse your conscience by performing good works. Why torture your body by fasting if you shamefully cater to it by sinning? Force your heart to abstain from sin first, and then make your body fast.

Fasting is simply a way of humiliating your soul. But where’s the humility in depriving yourself of food while piling up sins? So if it’s truly a spirit of piety that moves you to fast, you must also renounce your vices, extinguish the fire of your passions, break the impetuosity of your spirit, subdue the ardors of concupiscence, smother the flames of avarice, broaden the scope of your charity as far as possible and donate your excess wealth to the poor.

¹ Is 1:13

Let all the passions of your body come and break against the strength of your soul, so that your soul may then receive the help of your sanctified body. When, in holy rivalry, your chaste body and pious heart dedicate themselves to their religious duties, you can be confident of obtaining whatever you pray for. Such dispositions steadily enkindle devotion and cause your prayers to be increasingly crowned with unflinching holiness.

§2. Otherwise, even though you bowed your head and covered it with ashes, even though your neck were loaded with chains, and tears were streaming from your eyes to implore God's mercy—it'd all be in vain. Divine benevolence couldn't lean down toward you, because you'd have violated the duty of charity toward your neighbor.

That's exactly what we read in Isaiah: "Is this the kind of fasting I wish, the manner of keeping a day of penance: that a man bow his head like a reed, and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? This, rather, is the fasting I wish: releasing those unjustly bound, untying the thongs of the yoke, freeing the oppressed, sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless, clothing the naked, and not turning your back on your kinfolk. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound will be quickly healed; your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will protect you. Then you will call upon him, and he will answer you; you will cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am.'"²

Do these things—even outside periods of fasting—and you'll often obtain what you wish; do them during times of penitence, and you'll acquire a stronger title to God's favor.

§3. Such is the fasting which Christ Jesus desires; such is the fasting which is agreeable to almighty God.

² Is 58:5–9

As you can see, this kind of fasting is motivated, not by the remembrance of numerous and grave sins, not by some yearning for temporal glory, and not by the pointless hope of increasing your inheritance, but, rather, by a true understanding of the virtue of religion and by sincere devotion. When genuinely pious works are added to such beautiful dispositions, there is no telling what blessed fruits will result. You'll sense that God is favorably disposed toward you, and blesses you with his august presence.

Perform the works of mercy, therefore, and you'll sanctify your fasts. Feed the poor, and the graces of holiness will nourish your soul. Clothe the naked, and your sins will be covered. Eagerly offer hospitality to those with no roof over their head, so that God may receive you into his kingdom, through Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom belong glory and honor for ever and ever. Amen.

Sermon 70

Of Yokes and Burdens

§1. Dear brothers and sisters, many people are surprised to hear our Lord say: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me that I am gentle and humble-hearted; and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”¹

In their view, anyone who bravely bends over to assume that yoke and docilely shoulders that burden is then beset and tried by so many difficulties in this world that he seems called, not from labor to repose, but rather from repose to labor. And, in fact, St. Paul himself declares: “All who want to live religiously in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”²

How, then, can the Lord’s yoke be easy and his burden light, since bearing them is precisely what “living religiously in Christ Jesus” entails? And how can the Savior promise: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest”? Shouldn’t he say quite the opposite: “You who are resting, come and work”? After all, he’s the one who found laborers “standing idle in the marketplace” and sent them to work in his vineyard “during the heat of the day.”³

Again, St. Paul—while himself bearing the “easy” yoke and the “light” burden—added: “In everything we commend ourselves as ministers of God through much endurance, in afflictions, hardships, con-

¹ Mt 11:28–30 ² 2 Tm 3:12 ³ see Mt 20:1–12

straints, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, vigils and fasts.”⁴ Elsewhere in the same letter he adds: “Five times at the hands of the Jews I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once they stoned me, three times I was shipwrecked and passed a night and a day on the deep.”⁵ Nor was that all. There were endless other dangers—easy to enumerate, but impossible to endure without the help of the Holy Spirit.⁶

§2. Paul repeatedly experienced the labors and anxieties which he mentions, but he was clearly strengthened by the Spirit of God. As a result, while his outer self was wasting away, his inner self was being renewed day by day.⁷ Filled with sacred delights, his soul savored the promised repose, and the hope of future happiness smoothed out the difficulties of daily life and made them less crushing. Thus did Christ’s burden become light, and his yoke easy.

Paul himself even went so far as to term “light” all the afflictions and tribulations that we shudder merely to read about.⁸ His inner eye saw perfectly well the price we must pay, here in time, for the future life in which we’re spared the eternal sufferings of the godless and enabled to enjoy the eternal bliss of the just.

We consent to undergo surgery and cauterization so that these painful procedures may alleviate sufferings which aren’t eternal but result from a condition that we manage to prolong for a short while.

Soldiers spend long, weary years fighting horrific wars, in the uncertain hope of obtaining some brief and dull repose toward the end of their days.

⁴ 2 Co 6:4–5 ⁵ 2 Co 11:24–25 ⁶ See 2 Co 11:23–29, for instance. Any number of texts in St. Paul’s letters effectively demonstrate that ineffable joy can co-exist with darkest grief. The same man who in Rm 9:2 wrote “I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart” also wrote in 14:17 that “The kingdom of God is ... a matter of ... joy in the Holy Spirit.”—Translator’s note. ⁷ 2 Co 4:16 ⁸ 2 Co 4:17

Traders run all sorts of risks from storms and shoals, from the frightful wrath of sea and sky, in order to acquire fleeting riches—riches that will later prove to be even more dangerous than the tempests endured in acquiring them.

As for hunters, just think of the searing heat, the numbing cold, and all the perils to which they expose themselves. Horses, traps, ditches, rivers, precipices and wild beasts—everything spells danger for them. Suffering from hunger and thirst, they put up with the scantest and grossest food for the sake of killing some animal which—often enough, and despite all they went through—they wouldn't even consider eating back home. As a matter of fact, if they do manage to snag a boar or a deer, boasting about it gives them more pleasure than eating it.

Consider little children, too, and all the blows and torments they suffer every day, the vigils and fasts which our schools impose on them, not to instill wisdom in their young hearts, but to prepare them for empty riches and empty honors, to teach them the calculus and literature, and equip them with all the deceitful tricks of rhetoric.

§3. Still, we must admit that without love everything is difficult, but with love the difficulty disappears. For love makes all things light, so that we hardly feel what would otherwise be onerous and devastating.

Now, if disordered love (or “concupiscence”) facilitates the evil we do in our present fallenness, true love (or “charity”) will impart incalculably more resolve and facility to the good we do in view of eternal blessedness. How easy it becomes to endure temporal suffering in order to escape eternal punishment and so enter into eternal rest! No wonder St. Paul concludes so triumphantly: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us.”⁹

That's what makes this yoke easy, this burden light. If some few find it difficult to take up, love makes it easy for all. “As your lips have instructed me, I have kept the way of the law,” sings the psalmist; “My

⁹ Rm 8:18

steps have kept to your paths, and my feet have not faltered.”¹⁰ What in itself is difficult becomes easier through love.

Accordingly, we must admire the workings of divine goodness. For grace came and freed the inner man from the countless observances which had turned the divine yoke into something downright intolerable (as it must indeed have been for such headstrong persons as still bore it). And, once freed, the inner man, who “renews himself day by day,”¹¹ discovered that interior joy—along with the simple practice of faith, hope and charity—alleviates all the vexations imposed on the outer man by the rebellious prince who was cast out. Good will suffices unto itself, and God is satisfied with it.

Whatever persecutions the world may yet unleash, the angels at our Lord’s temporal birth chanted an incontrovertible truth: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.”¹² The newborn Child brought only an easy yoke and a light burden.

And besides, as St Paul assures us: “God, being faithful, will not let you be tried beyond your strength. Along with the trial, he will also provide a way through it, and so enable you to persevere.”¹³

¹⁰ Ps 17:4–5 ¹¹ 2 Co 4:16 ¹² Lk 2:14 ¹³ 1 Co 10:13

Sermon 161

Sins of the Flesh

§1. During the reading, we just heard the Apostle enumerate and denounce the passions of man. “Do you not realize,” he asked, “that your bodies are the very members of Christ? Would I, then, steal those members from him to make them the members of some prostitute? Heaven forbid!”¹ Paul says our bodies are the members of Christ because, when becoming man for us, Christ became our Head—the Head about whom it’s written that “he himself is the Savior of his body,² the Church.”³ Had our Lord Jesus Christ united himself only to a human soul, our souls alone would be his members; but since he also united himself to a body—in order to become in every respect the Head of beings composed of body as well as soul—it necessarily follows that even our bodies are also his members.

If, therefore, a Christian so scorns and debases himself that he wants to surrender to impurity, let him respect Christ dwelling in him, and not say, “Oh, I’ll give in! After all, I’m nothing much, since ‘all flesh is but grass.’”⁴ Wait a minute. Isn’t your body a member of Christ? What are you about to do? Come back here. What are you rushing into? Recognize Christ in you, spare him in you! “Shall I steal these members from Christ and make them the members of a whore?” For that’s what she is if she agrees to commit adultery with you. Then again,

¹ 1 Co 6:15 ² Ep 5:23 ³ Col 1:18 ⁴ Is 40:6

she, too, may be a Christian who's taking the members of Christ and making them members of an adulterer. Thus, both of you are offending Christ, disregarding both your Lord and the ransom he paid to redeem you.

Still, how can we call him Lord when he's made his servants his very brothers? And, as if that weren't enough, he's made them his own members. Does such an honor mean nothing to you? Do you spurn it because it was bestowed on you with such moving kindness? If you didn't have it, you'd be jealous; and because you *do* have it, you disdain it.

§2. Not satisfied with calling our bodies the members of Christ because Christ took on a body exactly like ours, the Apostle adds that they are the temples of the Holy Spirit, whom we've received from God. Thus the body of Christ makes our bodies his members, and the Spirit of Christ, dwelling in us, makes these same bodies the temples of the Holy Spirit. What are you going to scorn now—Christ, whose member you are, or the Holy Spirit, whose temple you are?

Now, that slut who's willing to sin with you—perhaps you wouldn't dare invite her into your room: the room with the conjugal bed. So you choose some dark corner in your house to wallow in the mire. That way, you respect your wife's bed, but disrespect God's temple. You don't let a wanton into the room where you sleep with your wife, and yet—though you're a temple of God—you go out looking for a sex partner. It seems to me, though, that God's temple is more honorable than your wife's bedroom.

Furthermore, wherever you go, Jesus sees you—Jesus, who created you, who redeemed you when you'd been sold into slavery, who died for you because you were dead. You don't respect yourself, but he never takes his eyes off of you. True, he's watching, not to help, but to punish you. For “the Lord has eyes for the just, and ears for their cry.”⁵

⁵ Ps 34:16

To petrify those who boast of false security and tell themselves, “I’ll do it, since God can’t bother noticing such base deeds,” the psalmist warns: “The Lord sets his face against evildoers, and he will wipe out their memory from the land.”⁶ What land? The one the psalmist sings of: “You are my hope, my heritage in the land of the living.”⁷

§3. Surely, there is in this assembly some impious, adulterous, unchaste, corrupted and corrupting man who applauds his own behavior and grows old in it without permitting his passion to age. He tells himself, “Oh yes, it’s true that the Lord watches evildoers so as to erase their very memory from the land. Yet here I am, an old man already. From youth right up to now, I haven’t denied myself a single pleasure. I’ve buried many chaste men who were younger than I; I’ve conducted the funeral of many a pure man, many a wise one—and, with all my debauchery, I’ve survived them all! So why remind me that the Lord watches evildoers to erase their memory from the land?”

Why? Because there’s another land—one where there are no impure people; another land, where God reigns in person. “Do not fool yourselves: no fornicator, no idolater, no adulterer, no homosexual, no thief, no drunkard, no perjurer will possess the kingdom of God.”⁸ That’s how he’ll erase their memory from the land.

Many deceive themselves even as they’re giving in to such crimes. Therefore, because these wretched souls live so abominably and still imagine they’ll enter into the kingdom of God, though they never will, it is written “He will erase their very memory from the land.” The home of the just will be a new heaven and a new earth, but the impious, the wicked and the debauched will never dwell there. If you recognize yourself in what I’ve been saying, decide where you want to live—decide now, while you can still change your ways.

⁶ Ps 34:17 ⁷ Ps 142:6 ⁸ 1 Co 6:9–10

§4. You see, there are two dwelling places: one amid eternal flames, and the other in the eternal kingdom. No doubt, different people will be tormented differently in the undying fire, but they *will* be there and *will* be tormented—all of them, though in varying degrees. Didn't Jesus say that Sodom's punishment on judgment day will be lighter than that of some other city?⁹ Or that many travel over land and sea to gain a convert and then make him deserve hell twice as much as they?¹⁰

Look at it this way: one person is tormented twice as much as another, some suffer more and some suffer less—still, it's no place you'd want to choose, is it? There, the mildest torments are more horrific than the things you fear most here on earth. How you'd tremble if threatened with prison, and yet you hate yourself enough to let your behavior consign you to the everlasting fire. I can visualize you quivering, panicking, turning pale, running to church, asking to see the bishop and kneeling before him as you cry, "Help me! They're confiscating my assets and throwing me into jail. Take pity on me! Save me!" That's how much we dread prison and loss—and yet worry so little about burning in hell.

Again, when danger becomes more imminent and someone lies near death, everybody calls for help and tries all sorts of expedients. "Hurry, hurry! Help him! This is a matter of life and death!" Life and death—that clinches it. Of course, we should do whatever we possibly can to help at such times, and do it to the best of our ability.

§5. Yet I'd like to question this man whose plight stirs me so profoundly. "Run," he sobs, "my life is at stake!" It's easy for me to reply, "Yes, I'll run to save the life of your body, but you must run to save your soul. You see, I can run for your body's sake, but I can't do a thing for your soul. I'd rather hear the truth from the mouth of Christ than the

⁹ Mt 10:15 ¹⁰ Mt 23:15

wailing your misplaced terror inspires. ‘Do not fear,’ he tells us, ‘those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul.’¹¹

“You’d have me run to save your life, but the foe you dread is right here—the foe whose threats drain all the color from your face. He can’t kill your soul: his fury is limited to your body. It’s up to you to spare your soul. He can’t kill it, but you can. Yes, you can kill it—oh, not with a dagger, but with your tongue. By striking you, your enemy puts an end to this life, but ‘the mouth, by lying, slays the soul.’¹²

“Consequently, the sight of what we dread here on earth ought to make us think of what we really should dread. We’re afraid of prison, but not of Gehenna? We’re afraid of torturers, but not of the demons in hell? We’re afraid of temporal punishment, but not of eternal fire? We’re afraid of dying momentarily, but not of dying eternally?

§6. “After all, what can you suffer at the hands of that man who wants you dead, who terrifies you, that man whom you flee, whose specter keeps you awake and sets you atremble if you doze off and see him in your dreams? He’ll separate your soul from your body, that’s what he’ll do. But consider where your soul will go, once separated. For in killing your body, all he can do is disconnect it from the soul which gives it life. Its life, you see, really results from the presence of the soul, and that presence—as long as it lasts—makes life indestructible. Thus, the enemy who has sworn he’ll murder you simply wants to drive out from your body the soul which makes it live.

“Now, doesn’t your soul in turn have a principle of life? If your soul is your body’s life principle, doesn’t your soul likewise draw its life from some source? And if bodily death consists in casting away the soul (or ‘life’), doesn’t the soul when dying also cast away what makes it live?

“Well, then, if we can discover, not only what the life of your body is (since we know it’s your soul), but also what the life of the life of your body is—in other words, what the life of your soul is—you should, it

¹¹ Mt 10:28 ¹² Ws 1:11

seems to me, fear losing your soul's life principle more than your body's. One of these deaths should inspire more fear in you than the other.

“Let's get to the core of our investigation. Why have I spent so much time on this point? The soul is the life of the body, and God is the life of the soul. The Spirit of God dwells in our soul and, through it, in our body, which thus becomes his temple.¹³ The Spirit has really and truly descended into our soul and flooded the chief part with divine love. In us humans, the chief part is our nobler nature—our heart, our mind: our soul. God occupies it and, through it, also occupies the subordinate part—that is, our body.

“Let the enemy rant and rave now, threatening you with death. Let him kill you if he can, and so separate soul from body. But at least don't let your soul separate itself from its own life. If you have cause to weep before this powerful enemy and plead in melting tones, ‘Don't strike me! Please don't spill my blood!’, doesn't God also plead with you, ‘Take pity on your soul, and thus please your Lord?’¹⁴ Or perhaps it's your soul itself which implores you, ‘Convince our foe not to strike. Otherwise, I'll leave because I can no longer live with you. If you want me to stay, make him stop.’

“Now, what is this soul which says, ‘If you want me to stay’? It's you yourself. You are the soul, and it's you who flee if the enemy assails your body; it's you who go away, who emigrate as your dust lies sleeping beneath even more dust. Then where will the life principle which animated this dust be? What will become of the spirit given to you by the breath of God? If it hasn't expelled its life—God himself—it'll remain in him. Yes, if it hasn't lost him, if it hasn't driven him away, your spirit will continue to dwell in him. So, if you worry about the weakness of your soul when it screams, ‘He's going to attack me, and we'll part,’ aren't you terrified when God himself says, ‘If you sin, I'll abandon you’?

¹³ Rm 5:5 ¹⁴ Si 30:24

§7. “I wish your groundless fears would imbue the rest of us with beneficial fear. Unavailing is the fright of all those who dread losing what they can’t keep forever anyhow. They must leave here one day, however much they quake at the thought and try to put off what must inevitably happen. Such fears are futile, indeed; yet they exist, we feel them keenly, and can’t just brush them aside. But that’s precisely why we must censure, reprimand and pity those wretches who dread dying and strive only to stave off death for a while. Why don’t they strive, instead, never to die? Because, despite all their efforts, they’ll never succeed. Is there nothing they can do? Absolutely nothing.”

My dear brothers, whatever you do, whatever safeguards you employ, wherever you flee to hide behind impregnable ramparts, whatever unimaginable riches you offer as ransom, whatever brilliant stratagems you devise to defeat the enemy—a fever suffices to stop you in your tracks and, despite all your efforts not to die immediately, at best you can only manage to die of that fever a bit later.

And yet you *can* succeed in never dying. Since you fear death, love life! Now, your life is God himself, your life is Christ, your life is the Holy Spirit. You don’t please him by doing evil; he doesn’t want a temple that’s in ruins, nor will he dwell in a sanctuary that’s been filthied. Oh, weep before him so that he’ll purify his sanctuary, weep so he’ll rebuild his temple, repair what you’ve destroyed, put up anew what you’ve torn down. Cry out to God, cry from the depths of your heart. That’s where he hears you; for if you sin where his gaze penetrates, you must cry out where his ears are attentive.

§8. And yet, when you’ve refocused your fear; when you’ve begun profitably to dread, not transitory torments, but inextinguishable flames; when, consequently, you no longer commit adultery—for that’s the vice I was led to discuss with you by the Apostle’s words: “Your bodies are the members of Christ”—when, lastly, the fear of burning in that everlasting fire has made you renounce adultery, you still won’t deserve

to be praised. Granted that you'll be less to be pitied than before, but you still won't deserve to be praised—less pitiable certainly, but not yet praiseworthy.

After all, what's so honorable about dreading punishment? What's really beautiful is loving righteousness. In order to know you better, I'm going to ask you a few questions. Listen to them as they ring in your ears, and then pose them to yourselves silently.

Tell me now: when passion has conquered you, and you have a willing accomplice, why don't you go ahead and commit adultery? You answer, "Because I'm afraid—afraid of hell, afraid of its everlasting flames. I'm afraid of Christ's judgment and the presence of Satan. I'm afraid of being condemned by God and of burning with the devil."

Well, now, shall I disapprove of your fear as I did earlier when you thought someone was out to take the life of your body? I had a solid reason then to say, "You're wrong, for the Lord has reassured us with these words: 'Do not fear those who kill the body.'" But now that you admit, "I fear hell and burning. I'm afraid of eternal punishment," what shall I say? That you're wrong? That your fear is unfounded? I wouldn't dare, since, after condemning your fear, the Lord has urged you to fear: "Do not fear those who kill the body and can do nothing more, but *do* fear him who has the power to cast both body and soul into the flames of Gehenna."¹⁵ Seeing that the Lord himself has instilled fear—a profound fear—and has twice threatened us by repeating the word "fear," I wouldn't have the nerve to say your fear is unacceptable. And I won't say it. By all means, go ahead and fear! There's nothing more deserving of fear, nothing you should fear more intensely.

Another question now. Suppose God didn't see you committing evil, and there was no one around to accuse you of it before his judgment seat, would you commit it then? Examine yourself, examine yourself sincerely. Well, would you commit it?

¹⁵ Lk 12:4–5

If you answer “Yes,” it means that punishment is what deters you. You don’t yet love chastity; you don’t yet have divine love. This horror of hell which keeps you from sinning acts as a bridle, preventing your will from doing what it wants. It’s a dread that—whip in hand—protects you and makes you observe the law. It’s the letter threatening you, not yet grace strengthening you. Regardless, let it continue to protect you, and by abstaining through fear, you’ll eventually receive divine love. It’ll enter into your heart and, as it penetrates ever more deeply, it’ll drive out fear. Fear kept you from committing evil; love will keep you from consenting to it, even if you could sin and get away with it.

§9. I’ve just said what you should fear. I’ve also said what you should seek. Work on love. Let love penetrate you through and through, welcome it into your heart together with the fear of sinning, call down into your heart the love which doesn’t sin but, instead, regulates your life.

As I said earlier, when love starts entering into your heart, fear starts leaving. The deeper love enters, the sooner fear leaves; and when love has completely saturated your heart, there’s no longer any trace of fear, since “perfect love casts out fear.”¹⁶ It evicts fear by filling the soul.

However, love doesn’t enter alone, but is accompanied by a special fear to which it has given birth: a chaste fear which perdures down the centuries.¹⁷ There’s a difference between servile fear (for example, fear of burning in hell) and this chaste fear (fear of displeasing God).

Try to understand it, my dearest brothers, by noting the different attitudes in the heart of man. Slaves fear offending their master, but only because they don’t want to be flogged or shackled, imprisoned or crushed as they turn the millstone. Such fears may keep them from doing wrong; but as soon as the master leaves, and there’s no one around to report them, they do the evil they’ve planned. Why? Because they fear punishment but don’t love what’s right.

¹⁶ 1 Jn 4:18 ¹⁷ Ps 19:10

As for righteous souls, true and free—and only the righteous are free, while every sinner is the slave of sin¹⁸—they love what’s good and true. Even though they could sin and not be observed, they revere the eyes of God. And if he himself came down and said, “I see you when you sin. I won’t condemn you, but you *do* displease me,” that would suffice. They don’t want to displease their Father, though he’s by no means an inexorable judge. What they fear is, not condemnation or punishment, but wounding their Father’s heart, grieving him who honors them with his love. Knowing how he loves them, and truly loving him in return, how could they possibly do anything to hurt him?

§10. Consider also dangerous and unsavory “loves.” Here’s a wretched libertine whose way of dressing and grooming himself nettles the woman who’s helping him lose his soul. If she but remarks, “I don’t like you in that cloak,” he throws it out. If in the dead of winter she says, “I prefer you in some lighter fabric,” he’d rather freeze than vex her. It’s not a question of prison or torture. No, she has only to say, “I don’t care to see you any more.” All he fears is the words, “You’ve seen my face for the last time.”

Incredibly, this one threat in the mouth of a shameless hussy makes him tremble, but in God’s mouth it does nothing. It should perturb us far more—but only if we love him. If we don’t, we won’t fear losing him. Yet we’ll quiver and quake—but only like slaves who dread the fires of hell, the terrifying torments, and the hideous perverted angels doing Satan’s work in Tartarus. Well, let’s fear that at least. If we have but little love for what’s good, at least let’s dread the atrocious torments of hell.

§11. Steer clear, then, of fornication in all its guises. “You are the temple of God, and God’s Spirit dwells in you. If anyone desecrates

¹⁸ Jn 8:34

God's temple, God will destroy him."¹⁹ Marriage is permitted. Don't seek anything outside of it. This burden isn't too heavy for you.

Because their love is greater, virgins *have* shouldered a heavy burden. Desiring even more fervently to please the heart to which they've dedicated themselves, they've renounced what was lawful for them, and have sought to enhance the beauty of their souls. It's as though they asked the Lord, "What do you wish us to do? Rule out adultery? Well, for love of you we're doing more than you ask."

"As for virginity," the Apostle writes, "I have no command from the Lord." So, then, why embrace this state? "But," he continues, "I will give you my opinion as one who, by the Lord's mercy, is a trustworthy counselor."²⁰ Thus, these loving souls, disdaining earthly nuptials and caresses, observe not only the commandment but the counsel, too. They make their souls ever more beautiful in order to please God all the more.

As a matter of fact, the more one adorns one's body—the outer self—the more one's soul loses its native charm; whereas one's lofty morals endow the soul with beauty in proportion as it scorns external embellishments. That's why St. Peter writes: "Groom yourselves, yes..." Now, don't you imagine that sensual souls, on hearing those opening words, thought he'd approve of visible ornaments? But their hopes, spawned by vanity, were soon dashed, for he went on to say: "Groom yourselves, yes; but do not go in for elaborate hairdos, gold chains, gems or sumptuous garments. Instead, adorn your inner self, who is so precious in the sight of God."²¹ Indeed, God wouldn't have created baubles for the outer person and left the inner denuded. Accordingly, he bestowed invisible treasures and ornaments on the invisible soul.

§12. Eager to obtain these holy jewels, Christian virgins haven't so much as desired what was permitted, nor have accepted such things when urged to. In so many cases, the fire of divine love even triumphed

¹⁹ 1 Co 3:16–17 ²⁰ 1 Co 7:25 ²¹ 1 P 3:3–4

over the violent efforts of their parents: the father was exasperated, the mother was in tears, yet the child soared above it all because she kept her eyes on “the fairest of the sons of men.”²² These virgins wanted to deck themselves out for him, and never live for anyone else. For if a married woman must think about earthly matters and how to please her husband, one who isn’t married is free to think about God and how to please him.²³ That’s what loving means.

The Apostle doesn’t say, “Virgins plan how they can avoid being condemned by God.” That again would be servile fear; a saving fear as well, it would distance them from evil and make them worthy to receive the spirit of love. But they aren’t figuring out how to avoid divine chastisements—only how to please God with their secret charm, their inner graciousness, and the beauty of their heart glowing before his eyes. There, and only there, are they unclad—never physically, but perpetually chaste in body and soul.

May the example they set motivate husbands and wives to avoid adultery at least. If virgins do more than is required, let the rest do at least what is commanded.

²² Ps 45:3 ²³ 1 Co 7:34

Sermon 162

Sinning in One's Body

Translator's Note

The translation of the Pauline text on which Saint Augustine based this sermon inspired him to consider sins of impurity as taking place *in* the body, and to expound the idea that they drag the soul down to the level of the flesh, imprisoning and enslaving the sinner there, so totally absorbed in the senses and submerged in carnal pleasure that he cannot even think of any other mode of existence.

Other translations of the same Pauline text indicate that such sins constitute a desecration of the sinner's body, an affront to and an attack on it. Hence they are rendered in English as "sins *against* the body."

In or against? There is really no contradiction. From Augustine's line of reasoning, it will be clear that sexual immorality takes place in the body and militates against it. The body is both the scene of, and the victim of, the crime.



I have taken the liberty of adding footnotes and, whenever possible, working such information as chapter and verse into the text itself.

While striving to remain faithful to the substance of this sermon, I have taken the further liberty of modernizing Augustine's sentence structure, his diction, and his quoting from Scripture (in the same vein as *The Good News for Modern Man*), as he would undoubtedly do if he were preaching today. When you come to think of it, isn't he?

§1. In 1 Corinthians 6:18, the blessed Apostle Paul writes: "All other sins a person commits are outside his body; but when he commits fornication,¹ he sins in his own body." Can the question these words raise be answered perfectly? It's so profound that I don't know. Nevertheless, with God's grace we can arrive at a plausible answer.

In verses 9–10 of the same letter, Paul has just declared: "Don't fool yourselves. Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, usurers, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers—none of those will inherit the kingdom of God." A few lines later, in verses 15–17, he adds: "Don't you realize that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I, then, take Christ's members and make them members of some whore? Of course not! For, surely, you can see that coupling with a whore makes you one body with her. As Scripture says: "The two become one flesh."² But, by the same token, anyone who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. So shun sexual immorality!"

Next, in verses 18–20, he states: "All other sins a person commits are outside his body; but when he commits fornication he sins in his own body."³ Surely you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in you, and whom you've received from God. You don't

¹ In Scripture, the term *fornication* can denote any sin of impurity, any instance of sexual immorality, licentiousness, debauchery, etc. ² Gn 2:24 ³ Msgr. Ronald Knox comments: "Evidently, other sins—that of gluttony, for example—are concerned with the use of our bodily powers, but they do not strike directly at the sanctity of the body, as fornication does."

belong to yourself, for you've been bought at a great price. That's why you should use your body for the glory of God."

Well, there you are. The Apostle has just listed a great many horrendous sins, all of which exclude us from the kingdom of God, and none of which can be committed without the instrumentality of the body.⁴ Anyone of sound mind would agree that perpetrating them absolutely requires a body. Now, in the passages we've read together, he is thinking exclusively of the body purchased so dearly at the cost of Christ's adorable blood and consecrated as a temple of the Holy Spirit. He wants us, rather than besmirch it with abominations, to preserve it in inviolable purity as the dwelling of God himself. So why puzzle us by adding: "All other sins are outside the body, but sexual sins are *in* the body"?

As I've already said, there's no sin that can be committed without the assistance of one's body. For instance, who could be a drunkard, a thief or a liar without the cooperation of his bodily organs? Even idolatry and avarice need the body's help to achieve their full effect. What does St. Paul mean, then?

First of all, we should note that all the disordered desires to which a person yields—even if only interiorly—are not outside the body, since clearly they are produced by sensuality and carnal prudence as long as that person still dwells in his body. The very crime mentioned in Psalm 13:1—"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'"—presupposes a body: the fool has to be in his body to say that or anything at all. Paul couldn't consider this sin to be outside the body, for in 2 Corinthians 5–10 he states: "We'll all appear before Christ's judgment seat, each of us to receive good or evil according to what he has done while in the body." Obviously, the blasphemer had to be in his body to say, "There is no God."

⁴ Between this sentence and the next Augustine repeats all the Scripture texts he has already quoted.

I won't mention what the same Doctor of the Gentiles writes in Galatians 5:19–21, where we read: “One can easily recognize the works of the flesh. They are fornication, impurity, lust, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, sectarianism, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. Concerning them I repeat what I've said before: those who do such things won't inherit the kingdom of God.”

Now, doesn't it seem that some of the items in that list—say, jealousy and anger and sectarianism—have nothing to do with the body? Yet they're classified as “works of the flesh” by the same Doctor who introduced the Gentiles to the faith and the truth. What, then, does he mean by “Any other sin is outside the sinner's body, but sexual immorality is *in* his body”?

§2. However uneducated or close-minded one may be, one can still appreciate what a thorny question this is. Still, if the Lord accedes to our pious desires and deigns to enlighten and assist us to some extent, we'll manage to give this text a plausible meaning.

Let's see. Here, the Apostle (through whom Christ himself was teaching) apparently wants to show that sexual immorality is even graver than all the other sins which are perpetrated through the intermediacy of the body, but which nevertheless don't enslave the human soul and subject it to the body, as indeed happens only in sins of impurity. There, the force, the fierceness of passion fuse soul and body into one; and the soul, glued and chained, clings to this evil so tightly that, at the moment of delivering himself up frenetically to this brutish act, it's impossible for the sinner to see or to will anything besides what's sweeping his soul headlong into sheer animality. Submerged, engulfed in this shameful, seething mire, his soul becomes a mere slave.⁵

⁵ “When we lie, it's soul conquering soul. When we fornicate, it's body conquering soul—the inferior conquering the superior, matter conquering spirit.”—St. Ambrose, P L 17, col. 214–15.

Hence, if the Apostle says that fornicators sin in their body, it's because then—and especially at the very moment of surrendering to this infamous act—the heart actually and absolutely becomes the body's slave. And, in order to rescue us from such a fate, he cries out: "What? Shall I take Christ's members and make them members of a slut? Never! Surely, you can see that lying with some prostitute makes you one body with her. As Scripture says, 'The two become one flesh.'"

Can the same be said about other sins—whatever they may be—which a person commits? No, for even when he's yielding to them, his mind remains free to think the matter over and focus on something else—whereas when he yields to impurity, he's utterly incapable of thinking about anything else. So totally absorbed is he in what he's doing, that his mind is no longer his.⁶ He's nothing but flesh⁷—"a gust of wind that passes by, never to return."⁸

Paul, therefore, can rightly speak as he does. In order to instill in us a profound horror of sexual immorality, he asserts that, compared to it, other sins are outside the body, whereas impurity chains one's soul within one's body because the unparalleled violence of this passion makes the soul a captive and a slave of carnal pleasure.

§3. The term *fornication*, however, should be taken in the broadest sense, as when we read in Psalm 73:27, "Those who stray from you will perish; you will destroy those who abandon you and commit fornication." The next verse tells us how to avoid doing that: "My happiness is to be close to God." It's easy to understand that there's fornication whenever we unite ourselves to the world rather than to God. Thus, St. John can write: "If anyone loves the world, love for the Father can't be in him."⁹ And St. James: "You adulterers, don't you see that friend-

⁶ No other temptation or sin is so obsessive, as Viktor Frankl (*The Doctor and the Soul*) notes, echoing Augustine, Aquinas, Allers and universal experience. ⁷ "Totus homo efficiatur caro."—Savonarola, *Meditation on Psalm 51*. ⁸ Ps 78:39 ⁹ 1 Jn 2:15

ship with the world means enmity toward God?”¹⁰ In a word, loving God is incompatible with loving the world, and anyone who loves the world is God’s enemy. Our Lord teaches the same truth: “No one can serve two masters; he’ll hate one and love the other, be devoted to one and scorn the other.” Then he draws the logical conclusion: “You can’t serve God and mammon.”¹¹

Accordingly, as I’ve already posited, fornication (taken in the broad sense and including absolutely everything) consists in attaching oneself to the world and not to God.

That’s how we must understand Paul’s axiom: “All the other sins a person commits are outside his body; but when he commits fornication, he sins in his own body.”

Take, for example, a soul that’s innocent of fornication because it’s closely attached to God rather than the world. Now suppose this soul commits various other sins, all through ignorance or negligence, forgetfulness or dimness of intellect. Provided these other sins spring, not from concupiscence of the flesh, but solely from human weakness, they’re the ones Paul means when he states: “All other sins are outside one’s body.” Not bearing the stamp of concupiscence, they can rightly be considered as being outside the body.

On the other hand, take a worldly soul which distances itself from God and embraces the things of earth. The moment it prostitutes itself by straying from him, it sins in its own body because carnal concupiscence tosses it to and fro among all things carnal and ephemeral; sensuality and the prudence of the flesh seize it and place it in the service of creatures rather than that of the ever-blessed Creator.

§4. That, in my opinion, is the sense—general or specific—which, while safeguarding the faith, we can assign to the famous passage we’ve been studying together. That great and incomparable Doctor, the Apostle Paul, wants to imbue us with a profound horror of fornication

¹⁰ Jm 4:4 ¹¹ Mt 6:24

strictly so called. And if, according to him, it's committed "in" the body, that's because sexual sins chain and nail the sinner to carnal pleasure more totally, more hopelessly than do other sins. In contrast to the disorder which these abominable sins create, the others—even though requiring the assistance of the body—seem to be "outside" the body. To subjugate the soul and place it in bondage to the body, fornication—particularly at the moment this degrading sin is consummated—possesses an irresistible driving force found nowhere else: so much so that the soul, at that time, can't really say or try to comprehend what's happening so swinishly in its very organs.

We may also grant that the Apostle meant fornication in the broadest acceptance of the word when he said: "All other sins are outside the body, but fornication is in it." In that case, we'd have to realize that, in clinging to the world instead of God through love of and desire for temporal goods, everyone sins in his own body—in the sense that, having given in and surrendered to every carnal concupiscence, he's totally the slave of creatures and has severed relations with the Creator through pride, which is the principle of all sin and manifests itself primarily by breaking away from God.

Whatever sin a person is lured into by the corruption and mortality weighing on each of us, as soon as he's free from the vice of fornication in the broad sense, his sins will be outside the body, for (as I've said several times) he himself will somehow be outside the body—a stranger to it.

Sermon 163

The New Temple, The New Life

§1. Brothers, if we consider what we were before the coming of grace and what grace has since wrought in us, we'll easily be convinced that, just as we humans improve, there are also buildings which become instruments of grace, so to speak, though they were previously erected in opposition to it. "Indeed," says the Apostle, "we are the temple of the living God."¹ And the Lord himself declares, "I shall live in them, and move among them."²

The idols within us might well have remained, since they couldn't walk anyhow. As for the supreme Majesty, he's at work in our hearts, provided we widen them by love. That's what Paul urges us to do: "You are restricted in your affections. Widen your hearts, so as not to drag the same burden as unbelievers."³ Yes, God lives and moves in us, provided we broaden ourselves, but he himself must help us do so. If love is what truly widens the heart—and love never constricts—isn't it therefore God who effects this broadening, since Paul teaches that "love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, whom we have been given"?⁴ We must never forget that this widening of the heart allows God to move within us.

§2. As the Apostle's letter was being read, we heard him say: "Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of

¹ 2 Co 6:16 ² see Ezk 37:27–28 ³ 2 Co 6:12–14 ⁴ Rm 5:5

the flesh war against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit war against the flesh. They are opposed to each other, so that you do not do what you want.”⁵ Paul was speaking to people who’d been baptized. Wasn’t that erecting the temple but not yet dedicating it?

What happens, brothers, when earthly buildings are afterwards consecrated to nobler uses? On the one hand, we demolish and cart away; and on the other, we make improvements. And so it is with us. There were in us works of the flesh, which you’ve just heard the Apostle catalogue. “The deeds of the flesh,” he said, “are easily identified: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, drunkenness, carousing, and the like.” Because they are all things to be destroyed, not improved, he adds: “I tell you, as I have told you before, those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”⁶ Let’s annihilate these vices in ourselves, therefore, the way we’d smash idols. As for our limbs, they’re what we must consecrate to nobler uses, putting them in the glorious service of love, though they previously acted in the shameful interest of concupiscence.

§3. Note, however, and carefully analyze Paul’s thinking. We’re God’s laborers, still working on the construction of his temple. This temple, nevertheless, has already been dedicated in the person of our Leader. Didn’t the Lord in fact rise from the dead after conquering death, and didn’t he ascend to heaven after making everything mortal about him disappear? Accordingly, the psalm of dedication was composed for him; and if, after his Passion, he says, “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have removed my sackcloth and robed me in gladness, so that my soul may praise you, and my joy may never cease,”⁷ it’s because this dedication took place after his Passion and at the moment of his resurrection.

⁵ Ga 5:16–17 ⁶ Ga 5:16–21 ⁷ Ps 30:11–12

Faith is constructing our temple right now, but its dedication will take place at the final resurrection. Hence, this dedicatory psalm, revealing the resurrection of our Leader, is followed—not preceded—by a psalm entitled “When the house was being built, after the captivity.”

At this point, recall how we groaned under bondage as the entire world, like an ocean of faithlessness, lay under the tyranny of Satan. The Redeemer came purposely to end that bondage by shedding every last drop of his blood; and having thus paid our ransom, he canceled the title to our captivity. “The law,” says Paul, “is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.”⁸ Yes, we were sold and subjugated to sin, but we’ve since been freed by grace; and now that our fetters have been removed, the temple is being constructed. Isn’t building it our very purpose in preaching the Gospel? Accordingly, the psalm I just mentioned begins: “Sing a new song to the Lord!”⁹ Don’t go imagining that this temple is sited somewhere apart (as happens among heretics and schismatics), for the next line reads: “Sing to the Lord, all the earth!”

§4. “Sing to the Lord a new song,” different from the old one. It’s the New Testament coming after the Old, the new man replacing the old one. “Cast off the old man, who belongs to your former way of life ... and put on the new man, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”¹⁰ Therefore, love singing a new song to the Lord, and may the whole earth sing to him! Sing as you build. Sing, and sing well. “Sing to the Lord, bless his name, tell of his salvation from day to day.”¹¹ Announce his salvation: day begotten by day, day come forth from day—his Christ. What is his salvation but his Christ? To obtain it, we pray in another psalm: “Show us your mercy, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.”¹²

That salvation was the longing prayer of just souls in days of old, about whom the Lord told his disciples: “Many have desired to see

⁸ Rm 7:14 ⁹ Ps 96:1 ¹⁰ Ep 4:22, 24 ¹¹ Ps 96:2 ¹² Ps 85:8

what you see, but they have not seen it.”¹³ They used to plead, “Grant us your salvation. Let us see your Christ while we’re still living in these bodies of flesh. Let us behold him in the flesh, since he’s going to deliver us from it. Grant us what will sanctify this flesh, and may it suffer to redeem the soul as well as the body. Grant us your salvation!”

Such was the desire of saintly old Simeon. Oh, yes, this was the prayer of that blessed man who was so rich in merit in God’s eyes. He, too, surely repeated, “Show us your mercy, Lord, and grant us your salvation.” And when his yearning broke into sighs, he was assured he wouldn’t die before seeing the Christ of the Lord. So the Christ was born. He was just arriving, and the old man was leaving but didn’t want to go before seeing him. The fulness of age was dragging him away, but heartfelt piety was holding him back. And as soon as the Christ came down and was born, as soon as Simeon saw him in Mary’s arms, the pious old man recognized the divine child, took him in his hands and cried out: “Now, O Lord, you may let your servant go in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.”¹⁴ That’s what he meant when he used to pray, “Show us your mercy, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.” Thus the old man’s supplications were answered when the world itself was growing old; thus the Savior gave himself to this old man immediately upon visiting this aging earth. But though the earth was already ancient, it should have heeded this exhortation: “Sing a new song to the Lord! May the entire world sing to him!” Down with the old; long live the new!

§5. “Sing to the Lord a new song! Let the whole world sing to him!”
See how the builders are trying to outdo one another:

“Sing to the Lord! Bless his name! Proclaim the good news (in Greek, the gospel)! Preach!”

“Preach what?”

¹³ Lk 10:24 ¹⁴ Lk 2:25–30

“Preach day born of day.”

“Who is he?”

“The salvation of God.”

“What can you add concerning this day born of day?”

“He’s the light born of light, the Son born of the Father—
he’s salvation! Proclaim his glory to all nations, his wonders to
all peoples.”

That’s how the Temple was built after the captivity:

“Mighty is the Lord, and greatly to be praised. He’s to be feared
above all gods.”

“What gods?”

“All the gods of the nations. They’re nothing but demons,
whereas our God made the heavens.”¹⁵

Yes, and he made the saints, too, and the apostles—those “heavens”
that declared the glory of God. There’s no language, no dialect which
doesn’t understand what they’re proclaiming. Their voice rings out
through the whole world, and their words to the ends of the earth.
Thus the entire world sings the new song.¹⁶

§6. Let’s lend an ear, then, to this Apostle who calls himself the Lord’s
architect. “Like a skilled architect,” he says, “I have laid the founda-
tion.”¹⁷ We must heed this master builder, who both destroys and con-
structs. The new construction is this: “Walk according to the Spirit.”¹⁸
The destruction is this: “Do not gratify the desires of the flesh, for the
desires of the flesh war against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit
war against the flesh. They are opposed to each other, and they prevent
you from doing what you would.”¹⁹ That proves you’re still building
the temple and aren’t yet ready to dedicate it.

¹⁵ Ps 96:4–5 ¹⁶ Ps 19:4 ¹⁷ 1 Co 3:10 ¹⁸ Ga 5:16 ¹⁹ Ga 5:16–17

“The desires of the flesh ... keep you from doing what you want.” Exactly what do you want? You want to have absolutely no desire for disordered and guilty pleasures. Is there a single saint who doesn’t want the same thing? But his dream doesn’t come true in this life. Flesh keeps fighting against spirit, and spirit against flesh, always at loggerheads, with the result that you don’t do what you intend. You never reach the point where you no longer have evil inclinations.

What to do, then? Walk according to the Spirit; and since you can’t completely extinguish the desires of the flesh, don’t give in to them! Of course, you should strive to destroy them, to excise and uproot them completely; but as long as they’re still present in you, as long as your members harbor a law which resists the law of your spirit, don’t perform the works of the flesh! You’d like never again to have such desires, but those very desires resist you. Well, resist them! You’d rather not have them anymore, but you *do* have them. “The flesh battles against the spirit.” Then let the spirit battle against the flesh! “And,” as Paul remarks, “you do not do what you want.” You don’t succeed in crushing these tendencies of the flesh, in stopping them from doing as they please, or in preventing them from making you do what they want. Well, if they won’t yield to you completely, don’t you yield to them either. You’re being fought; so fight back, and one of these days you’ll be the victor.

§7. For, surely, my brothers, we will conquer. Let’s believe, let’s hope, let’s love; and some day we’ll triumph—on the day when the post-exilic temple which we’re now constructing will be dedicated. Death itself will end by being destroyed when this corruptible body is clad in incorruptibility, this mortal body in immortality.

While awaiting that day, read Paul’s triumphant cry: “O death, where is your strength in battle?”²⁰ That’s the song of conquerors, not of combatants, for combatants sigh: “Take pity on me, O Lord, for I’m

²⁰ 1 Co 15:55

weak. Heal me, Lord, for my bones are rattled, and my soul is violently troubled. What are you waiting for, O Lord? How long must this go on?”

How long must this go on? The Lord replies: “Until you’re thoroughly convinced that I’m the one who holds you up and keeps you on your feet. If I rescued you the moment you call on me, you wouldn’t realize the hard work involved in resisting evil. You’d bank on your own strength, and then pride would prevent you from scoring a victory. The fact is that you’ll beg for help, and I’ll answer, ‘Here I am!’”²¹

But although God delays, he doesn’t forget us. In fact, his delaying is itself the very help we need; for if he granted our wishes too soon, he wouldn’t be assuring that we grow perfectly healthy.

§8. My brothers, did he let Paul down when Paul feared becoming boastful in the midst of combat—afraid, he said, “because of the sublime revelations granted me”?²² Even he, as you can see, had to fight in the arena, nor did he yet enjoy any guarantee that he’d triumph. “Lest I become too elated over such lofty revelations...” Who’s saying, “Lest I become proud”? Why is he afraid? After all, he has so often rebuffed pride and quashed presumption. Yet here he is, worrying lest he become puffed up. As if it weren’t sufficient that he dreads self-exaltation, see what remedy he finds he must take: “Lest I become vainglorious, a thorn in the flesh was given me—an angel of Satan to harass me.”

What a venomous wound if venom alone could heal it! “An angel of Satan to buffet me...” To keep the Apostle from holding his head too high, his head itself was assailed. What a counter-poison, distilled (so to speak) from the serpent himself—the serpent who infected us all with pride. “Taste the apple,” he urged, “and you shall be like gods.”²³ That’s how he inoculated us with pride, making us fall the very same way he’d

²¹ for the last sentence, Is 58:9 ²² 2 Co 12:7 ²³ Gn 3:5

fallen. Wasn't it fitting, then, that he'd serve to heal the deadly wound he himself had inflicted?

What does Paul say next? "That is why I begged the Lord three times to make the angel of Satan leave me." What had become of this promise: "You will cry for help, and I will answer, 'Here I am'?" So he begged the Lord, not once, not twice, but three times; and he surely added, "How long must I wait, O Lord?" Though the Lord delayed, he was nonetheless present and did not renege on his promise: "When you call on me, I will be there."

If the doctor is present when he does what pleases you, isn't he equally present when he has to operate and cause you pain? Even though you beg him to stop when you feel the sharp blade, it's his very love for you that makes him continue.

To convince yourself that the Lord didn't abandon his Apostle, consider heaven's reply to that thrice-repeated prayer: "God said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'"²⁴ The divine Physician was saying, "I know what needs to be done. I know how large this tumor would grow, and that's why I must remove it and cure you. Be still. I know what I have to do. My grace is sufficient for you." Yes, "my grace" — and he could have added: "but not your will." So there you have it all: how this soldier called out in the heat of battle, how he reported the danger besetting him, and how he was divinely reassured.

§9. And now, what will the triumphal hymn be like? While the temple is still being constructed, the combatant speaks, but the victor will sing out when finally it is dedicated: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin." So chanted the Apostle, and wouldn't we presume he was already there? However, to make us understand that he's speaking, not of the warfare, but of the reward to come, he prefaces his words with "Then will be fulfilled..." —

²⁴ 2 Co 12:9

not “is,” but “will be.” What will be fulfilled? This saying of Scripture: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?” No longer and nowhere will there be either the sting of death or, consequently, any sin.

But, soldier, why hurry so? Later, later! Since pride would prevent you from ever attaining this happiness, let your humility gain merit for later. Yes, later. Meanwhile, as you struggle and exhaust yourself amid the dangers you’re exposed to, repeat over and over, “Forgive us our trespasses.”²⁵ As you fight on, repeat this truth; repeat it with all your heart, for, “If we profess to be sinless, we are deceiving ourselves.”²⁶ Making such a claim would be doing the devil’s own task, fooling ourselves instead of living by the truth—for, not being sinless here below, we’d be lying if we claimed to be. Let us, therefore, speak the truth, so as to arrive at serenity someday. Let’s speak the truth even while actively waging war, and thus experience the security that victory confers. Then we’ll rightfully say, “O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin.”

§10. Still, you’re counting on the law handed down to you with all its precepts. But, lest the letter of the law slay you, the Spirit must give you life. Oh, yes, you mean well, but meaning well isn’t enough. You need help in order to will fully and to accomplish what you intend. Do you want to know what the letter of the law can do when you lack the help of the Spirit of God? You’ll find out in the same passage. Having exclaimed, “O death, where is your sting?”, the Apostle immediately adds: “The power of sin is the law.”

How so? Not because the law commands evil or forbids anything good, but, on the contrary, because it commands what’s good and forbids what’s evil. The law is the power of sin because “the law came in to make sin abound.”²⁷ Again, how so? Because, in the absence of

²⁵ Mt 6:12 ²⁶ 1 Jn 1:8 ²⁷ Rm 5:20

grace, forbidding anything only stirred up concupiscence; and mankind, relying on its own strength, fell into all sorts of grave sins.

What did grace do then? It “abounded all the more.” The Spirit came, and everything you borrowed from Adam, along with everything you added to it with your depraved morals—all of it was erased and completely forgiven by the Spirit. Moreover, he taught us how to pray, promised us his grace, showed us how to fight, helped us in battle, and crowned the victors. “Therefore,” says Paul, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

“So, then, did the law bring about my death? By no means! Sin is what begot death in me through the good, so that sin might be shown to be precisely what it is: sin. Yet, had it not been for the law, I would not have known sin; nor would I have known what concupiscence is, had the law not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ Taking advantage of the commandment, sin stirred up all sorts of concupiscence in me ... and I died.”²⁸ That is what is meant by “The letter kills.”²⁹

§II. As a result, if you want to avoid the perils of the law, you must have recourse to the grace of the Spirit, for faith urges us to hope for what the law commands. Ask him to come to your assistance. Don’t remain guilty under the burden of the letter. May God, through his Spirit, back your efforts, lest you resemble the proud Pharisee.

With sin as the sting of death, and the law as the power of sin, what might human weakness and depleted will power hope to achieve? As Paul admits, “I may want what is right, but I cannot do it.”³⁰ What to do, then? On the one hand, sin is the sting of death; on the other, the law gives sin its power. The law came in order to make sin abound; for if the law could bestow life, holiness would really spring from the law. Yet Scripture shows that we’re all in bondage to sin.

²⁸ Rm 7:7–13 *passim* ²⁹ 2 Co 3:6 ³⁰ Rm 7:18

How is that? To keep you from straying, from falling into the abyss, or sinking beneath the waves, the law erected a barrier in front of you so that, finding no way out, you'd have recourse to grace. "Scripture declares all to be in bondage to sin, so that what was promised..." Promising means binding yourself to act, not merely stating what you'll do; otherwise, it wouldn't be a promise, but an announcement. "Scripture has revealed all as being in bondage to sin, so that the promised blessing would be given to believers through faith in Christ Jesus."³¹ Note well the word "given." What is there to boast of? This was given to you! In point of fact, do you have anything that wasn't a gift?

Sin, then, is the sting of death, and the law the power of sin. Moreover, Providence, in its goodness, has permitted this situation in order to subject mankind to sin and, thus, have us pray for help, seek grace, appeal to God, and no longer trust in our own virtue. If, therefore, the words "Sin is the sting of death, and the law is the power of sin" leave you trembling, apprehensive and weary, listen to what follows: "Thanks be to God, who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."³²

§12. Consequently, if your struggle against the various concupiscences of the flesh has you feeling overwhelmed, walk according to the Spirit, implore the Spirit, beg God for his grace. If, furthermore, the law of your bodily self—in your inferior nature or in the flesh—resists the law of the Spirit by holding you captive to the law of sin, remember that this very disorder will be righted through victory.

Only be sure to pray, to cry out for help. "Pray always, and do not lose heart."³³ Pray with all your might. Shout "Help!", and he'll reply, "Here I am." Then recollect yourself, and you'll hear him tell your soul, "I am your salvation."³⁴

Yes, when the law of the flesh starts rebelling against the law of the Spirit and tries to enslave you to the law of sin residing in your members,

³¹ Ga 3:22 ³² 1 Co 15:57 ³³ Lk 18:1 ³⁴ Ps 35:3

say, in a spirit of prayer and humility, “What a wretched soul I am!” But that’s what being human means. “If you were not mindful of us, O Lord, where would we be?”³⁵ Wretched, indeed—utterly without hope if the Son of man hadn’t come. In your distress call out, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?”³⁶ And if it’s faith and humility which inspire your prayer, Truth itself will reply: “The grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”³⁷

³⁵ see Ps 8:5 ³⁶ Rm 7:24 ³⁷ Rm 7:25

On Unceasing Prayer

from *Exposition on the Psalms, Psalm 38*

“In the anguish of my heart I groan aloud.” There is a secret anguish which is inaudible to your fellow men; but when your heart is so filled with concern that the hurt inside you finds a voice, they naturally seek the cause... Still, who can be sure of the cause except God, who hears and sees your anguish? If men hear at all, they hear only your groaning, but the anguish within eludes them.

Though it remain unknown to others since the human heart is unfathomable, [you can say to God:] “All my longing is known to you.” Now, if your longing lies open to him who is your Father and who “sees in secret,” he will answer you, since the longing of your heart is itself your prayer; and if your longing is constant, so is your prayer.

St. Paul had a purpose in saying, “Pray without ceasing.” But are we supposed to kneel, lie prostrate or lift our hands to him continuously? I do not think we can always be doing that. There is, however, another kind of unceasing prayer—an interior kind: the longing of your heart.

Whatever else you may be doing, if you but fix your longing on God’s sabbath rest, your prayer will be ceaseless. So, if you wish to pray without ceasing, do not cease to desire. The constancy of your longing will be the ceaseless voice of your prayer, and that voice will fall silent only when your love ceases...

If you love ceaselessly, you are always crying out; if you are always crying out, you are always longing; and if you are always longing, you are always thinking of your eternal rest in the Lord.

“All my longing is known to you.” What if God knows the longing in your heart but does not hear your groaning? That is impossible, for the groaning is the very voice of your longing.

At times, God’s servants may seem to be laughing. Does that mean their heart’s longing has died within them? No, if the longing is still there, the groaning is there as well; and even though men fail to hear it, it never ceases to sound in the hearing of God.