

Ash Wednesday (Self-Preservation)

"Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return."

1. On Sunday we reflected on how fasting is practicing for heaven. In addition to this, fasting is important for many reasons: it is something Our Lord did; it also bridles the passions, clears the mind for thought and prayer, makes demons flee, and satisfies for sin. In a word, it makes it more possible for God to fill us with good things, most especially at Easter.
2. If fasting is so good, why do we resist it so much? One word, self-preservation. This is the strongest natural instinct in fallen human nature. Everyone knows that a man will give all he owns to save his life. Think of the bad thief on the cross next to Our Lord: "Save us and save yourself!"
3. But on the other hand, there is this spiritual principle: the more we forget ourselves and focus on God, the more we are filled with joy. This is on display in the lives of the saints. And this is why we must practice self-denial and self-effacement. But we hesitate... Self-preservation.
4. Protected by our natural instincts of self-preservation, the kingdom of me, myself and I is well organized and is very capable of automatically defending itself. A man hangs by a branch over a cliff and prays to be saved. God says, "I will save you, but you have to let go!" A little bird on the edge of the nest... having never flown, hesitates. Self-preservation. This is a primal... primordial instinct.
5. Adam ate the apple to keep from losing his beloved Eve, but after being discovered, he readily pointed the finger at her, and she at the serpent. Self-preservation. Think of Simon Peter's three-fold denial of His Lord and King on Holy Thursday. Self-preservation. In the story of Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5 + picture outside of Sacristy in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome), St. Peter directly asks them, each in turn, if they are telling the whole truth. They each lie and immediately fall dead. Self-preservation.
6. Thus, we can conclude, to be completely open to God, to possess Him completely in heaven, requires conquering this deeply rooted natural instinct through a life of self-denial, through acts of self-forgetfulness and self-effacement... As St. Teresa of Jesus put it, "to make little of oneself"; "to enter on the way without thinking of consolations." This is something fasting can help us do... overcome our primal instincts in order to open our souls more and more to God and His holy will. Otherwise, we will be just like Adam and Eve of old... forever trying to hide from God in our nakedness.
7. "Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return."