

Introduction

“Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile, ecce nunc dies salutis: in his ergo diebus exhibeamus nosmetipsos sicut Dei ministros in multa patientia, in ieiuniis, in vigiliis, et in caritate non ficta.”

Behold, now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation; in these days therefore let us conduct ourselves as God’s ministers, in much patience, in fasting, in vigils, and in charity that is not false.

This antiphon, for the Magnificat at Second Vespers of the first Sunday of Lent, has been calling Christian men and women to a correct observance of Lent most probably for over a thousand years. It is present—for *first* Vespers for the first Sunday of Lent—in the late thirteenth century Monastic Breviary of Hyde Abbey. This breviary is, of course, a witness to an extant liturgical tradition, and we may reasonably assume that the antiphon had earlier origins. It is equally present in the *Breviarium Romanum*, as well as those of Lyons and Milan (the latter on Monday of the first week of Lent). The Cistercian and Dominican breviaries contain it as the antiphon for first vespers. It does not, however, appear intact in the *Liturgia Horarum* published by Paul VI; parts of the antiphon are used variously and disconnectedly later in Lent.

Of course its contents are largely derived from Saint Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 6—and I recommend a prayerful contemplation of this chapter in the silence of the retreat of these these Ember days. But, as ever, in this antiphon Our Holy Mother, the Church, in her liturgical tradition presents us with a succinct distillation of God’s Word as it addresses us in this sacred season of Lent, and it will profit us a great deal, I believe, to ponder and contemplate the realities of which it sings in these days.

As an aside, of course we do not know who composed this antiphon, but it is interesting, is it not, to consider that somewhere, sometime many centuries ago, someone (surely a monk!) found that these words appositely captured the realities to which Lent called him? They may well be the fruit of a lifetime’s *lectio divina*—a fruit that in God’s Providence nourishes us now, hundreds of years later, and which feeds us with the very same faith and observance, handed on in the Church’s tradition. Thanks be to God the Holy Spirit for inspiring whomever its author was—and may he pray for us now as we seek, ourselves, to enter more deeply into the realities of which he was moved to write and sing.

We can conveniently divide the antiphon into five parts, considering two today, two on Ember Friday, and the final one on Ember Saturday morning.

- I. Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile, ecce nunc dies salutis:
Behold, now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation.

Our antiphon opens with the words of Saint Paul. (2 Cor. 6:2) Saint Paul is himself echoing the cry of the Prophet Isaiah (Is. 49:8) whom he cites directly, in extrapolating an appeal to the Corinthians “on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God”. (2 Cor. 5:20)

Saint Paul is being Saint Paul, and he is writing to his ‘troublesome’ Corinthians—clear and strong language is the order of the day. And indeed, it is the day of *salvation* about which he is speaking (or is he shouting?).

The reality of salvation implies the reality of damnation. At the beginning of Lent we would do well to revisit these realities. Salvation or damnation: that is what this is all about.

Lent isn’t a convenient time to diet or to work on becoming a nicer person or to curb our bad habits a bit. No, it is about getting on with the business of ensuring that we are on the path to salvation and not the path to damnation! Sure, that involves eliminating bad habits (let’s call them by their proper name: “vices”) and growing in charity (not “niceness”, whatever in fact that means) and yes, it does involve that abstinence from food for spiritual motives which we call “fasting”. But all of this is for our eternal salvation, not to improve our social or physical appearance.

If salvation and damnation were not realities, we have no need of Lent—nor of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the unique *Saviour* of mankind, for that matter. If our salvation or damnation is not a real question that is to be decided on how we live our life and respond to Almighty God's call to each of us, there is no reason to enter the monastic life (or to pursue any other vocation for that matter) and to persevere in it.

But they are realities, revealed to us by Almighty God in history. They are realities with which we must daily reckon and to which we must attend, most particularly in Lent, "the day of salvation."

This concept of a particular time of grace, of salvation, announced by Isaiah and repeated by St Paul is at the heart of the Church's ancient Lenten tradition. St Benedict bears witness to this in Chapter 49 of the Rule:

"In these days of Lent the brethren should lead lives of great purity, and should also in this sacred season expiate the negligences of other times. This will be worthily done if we refrain from all sin and apply ourselves to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and to abstinence. In these days, therefore, let us add something to the wonted measure of our service, such as private prayers and abstinence in food and drink. Let each one, over and above the measure prescribed for him, offer to God something of his own free will in the joy of the Holy Spirit. That is to say, let him stint himself of food, drink, sleep, talk and jesting, and look forward with the joy of spiritual longing to the holy feast of Easter."

Saint Benedict is addressing his monks—us!—and we must most certainly take his teaching to heart. The salvation of my own soul is my first duty before Almighty God. To be condemned to hell because I was too busy to attend to my own spiritual needs would be the ultimate ignominy.

That being said, most particularly for the monk, Lent is also a particular time to offer penances and sacrifices for others, as I asked in our Ash Wednesday Chapter Conference. Most certainly we must attend to ourselves, but our life and vocation enables us and demands us to do much more.

In this we must be as generous as we are able, for if we monks do not willingly do penance for the sins of others, who shall? If we stint in making our due contribution to the economy of grace, should we be surprised at its bankruptcy?

For there are serious sinners in the world (and St Paul would interject here to remind us, as he did with the Corinthians: "And such were some of you!" 1 Cor. 6:11) who need the grace to take the first steps in the conversion of their lives. Some are known to us, and we rightly pray for them by name and offer specific penances for them. Some are known only to God—but He willingly accepts our sacrifices and applies them where a soul opens up to His grace. Their salvation or damnation is in question, and we must do what we can though our penances to help.

And we must do this now: *nunc*—in this acceptable time, on this day of salvation. To put it another way, procrastination is the path to perdition. We cannot afford to have slept through the day of salvation. It is here now. It demands a response from us now—not possibly some time later on when it may well be too late.

Drawing upon many texts of Sacred Scripture which permeated the Liturgy of Lent, Saint Benedict reflects this urgency in Prologue to the Rule:

"Up with us then at last, for the Scripture arouseth us, saying: 'Now is the hour for us to rise from sleep.' Let us open our eyes to the divine light, and let us hear with attentive ears the warning that the divine voice crieth daily to us: 'Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.' And again: 'He that hath ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.' And what doth he say? 'Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Run while ye have the light of life, lest the darkness of death overtake you.'"

Saint Benedict is not speaking specifically about Lent here, but about the necessity of not procrastinating in following the Lord's call. But what words could be more appropriate in Lent? What injunctions could be more pertinent? For if Lent is not a time to get on with the following of the Lord, what is it?

Now is the time for us to rise from sleep. This is the time to run towards God whilst we have the light of life, lest the darkness overtake us. For *behold, now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation*.

II. In his ergo diébus exhibeámus nosmetípsos sicut Dei minístros.
In these days therefore let us conduct ourselves as God's ministers.

It is significant that this antiphon calls our attention to our conduct, to how we behave in Lent. It does not ask for us to have vaguely sincere dispositions. Rather, it insists that we act, that we are able to be seen to be behaving as God's ministers. Let us not be distracted by the word "minístros". It means "servants", not necessarily someone ordained to a specific ministry (though of course the antiphon has much to say to them as well). Of course, our behaviour, our actions, can be internal—both love and hatred arise from within—but they can and should (or should not) influence and be in harmony with our conduct.

So, we are called to conduct ourselves as servants, servants of God (and of no one else, as the Gospel of the first Sunday of Lent insists; cf. Mt 4:1-11). How? *In much patience, in fasting, in vigils, and in charity that is not false*, our antiphon insists. But we shall consider these in the coming days. This afternoon let us remain with the reality that we are to behave as servants/minístros of God. First things first, as it were.

In seeking to place first things first we can do no better than to begin with the first commandment of the Decalogue: "I am the LORD your God. You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve," of which we were indeed starkly reminded in last Sunday's Gospel. And lest we be tempted to dismiss the Old Testament as old, let us remember the greatest commandment, as taught by Our Lord, in the New Testament: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Mt 22:38)

If we are to behave as God's servants and minístros, we have more than enough in these commandments for a detailed examination of conscience, and Lent is certainly the opportunity (it is the *day of salvation*) to make that examination of conscience and to deal with what it reveals in the Sacrament of Confession, in the reformation of our lives and in appropriate penance. False gods must be identified and dethroned. Obstacles which prevent us from rendering to Almighty God the worship that is His just due must be overcome and removed. First things must come first, and the demonic temptation to forms of activism which obscure and prevent our fulfilment of this duty must be recognised for what it is, and be resisted—or be thoroughly exorcised where it has taken hold.

It is certainly true that the enclosure of the monastery protects its monks from many of the false gods worshipped beyond its walls—and thanks be to God that in His Providence we weak cenobites have been given that protection. We need it! We need our bells to remind us that God has first claim on all our activity, that "nothing is to be put before the work of God". (Rule, ch. 43) A monk's choir stall is his pulpit, as the saying attributed to Dom Guéranger has it. It is his primary apostolate, the principal witness he is called to give in the Church and before the world. "You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve."

So too we need superiors who command our obedience and who bless our insights and suggestions, or who correct them, so that we are sure that what we are doing is of God. "For the obedience which is given to superiors is given to God," as Saint Benedict teaches. (Rule, ch. 5)

But even within the enclosure a monk is capable of behaving as if he serves false gods, most particularly the god of self-will in its many and insidious manifestations. For a monk who does not crucify self-will is not a minister of God, but a minister, a servant, of himself. If this cancer is not identified and removed at the outset it is capable of killing the monk's vocation and of leading him to merit eternal condemnation. For we are called to be God's servants, not servants of ourselves.

Saint Benedict is really quite strict about this, insisting that when a monk is given a command:

"If the disciple obey with ill-will, and murmur not only in words but even in his heart, then, even though he fulfil the command, his work will not be acceptable to God, who sees that his heart is murmuring. For work

such as this he will gain no reward; nay, rather, he will incur the punishment due to murmurers..." (Rule, ch. 5)

Once again, the Lord's commandment resounds: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

One of the things that a novice must learn is how to behave in the monastic habit. Some of these customs—keeping one's hands underneath the scapular, walking slowly and with recollection, etc.—can seem decidedly odd at the outset. What does it matter? And yet they are a part of conducting ourselves as a monk. They call us to deny ourselves and to become he whom Almighty God calls us to be.

The rite of the clothing of a novice in the Benedictine habit is more explicit. As the postulant has his lay garments taken from him the rite prays without hesitation or any respect of persons: "May the Lord strip off from you the old man and his acts." Then, during the solemn chanting of the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, the superior clothes the new novice in the habit praying: "May the Lord put on you the new man, who was created according to God, in justice and holiness of life."

There is a trite popular saying that the habit does not make the monk: it is often used by laity or religious who would prefer lay or secular clerical dress to be worn in place of a habit that might somehow make people feel uncomfortable. Well, the habit does make the monk, in so far as it helps to form, guide and protect him—from himself as much as from any perfidious influences. And the habit should make people feel uncomfortable (including the monk himself at times) because it bespeaks of the radical service of God first and foremost—something which (rightly and equally radically) challenges those who worship the panoply of false gods that infests the world of our day.

Are we to behave as servants and ministers of God? Are we *in these days* [to] *conduct ourselves as God's ministers*? Then let us be worthy bearers of the habit it is our privilege to wear. Let us strive anew, most particularly in this sacred season of Lent, to become ever more that new man who was created according to God in justice and holiness of life, for in this lies our salvation.

III. In multa paciéntia. *In much patience.*

In these days therefore let us conduct ourselves as God's ministers in much patience....

Patience is not a virtue to which many of us aspire. The world of instant communication and messaging forms us in the expectation of an immediate response. If one does not arrive, we feel aggrieved. In business, targets are set and profits are expected—the sooner the better. Prompt success is rewarded; those who do not achieve it are left behind. Personally we establish deadlines for our lives and careers that, if taken too seriously, can turn from being quite reasonable aspirations and goals into sources of profound disappointment and even of debilitating anxiety. All my peers have achieved this or that, we fret, whilst I have not!

Ecclesiastically we can fall into the same trap. "Why," we ask with impatience, "is this or that the case?" in respect of crises in the Church. "Why does Almighty God permit it to continue?" Why does not the bishop or the pope—or someone, anyone!—do something?

Candidates enquiring about entering the monastery, the seminary or the religious life can arrive with pencils ready to mark dates in their calendar for their profession or ordination and can feel aggrieved when the superior speaks rather of the demands of the horarium for today.

Personally, too, we become frustrated with our own lack of progress in the spiritual and moral life. The same temptations return; we fall into the same sins. When, we (quite reasonably) ask, will I make some real progress in virtue? When shall I finally be able to leave my vices behind me?

When? When? When? We ask this question so many times each day about so many things—things that are both trivial and of importance. We expend much energy waiting, in looking at our watches and at our unresponsive communications devices. “When?”, we continue to ask, “will I finally have the answer?”

And all the while, in Lent, the Church’s Sacred Liturgy sings of *the acceptable time...the day of salvation*, and counsels us to *conduct ourselves as God’s ministers, in much patience...*

This is not really an answer, is it? It doesn’t tell us when we will get what we want or need. It just tells us to be patient, if anything increasing our anxiety and frustration.

Our Lord was equally frustrating in His teaching:

I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. (Mt 6:25-33)

“Seek first [God’s] kingdom and His righteousness” and all the rest of what we need will follow in due course.

But not even this teaching satisfies our lust to know “when” we will have what we desire. Lust, of course, is by definition a desire that has become disproportionate, that has taken us over and that has possessed us to the extent that our wishes and behaviours exceed what is acceptable, proportionate and right. The sin of impatience is the disordered desire to have an immediate answer to the question “When?” that consumes us and renders us incapable of attending to the matters at hand because of the state of anxiety it creates within us. We cannot seek first God’s Kingdom and His righteousness because we are preoccupied with stamping our foot in a state of increasing impatience.

Saint Paul suffered from impatience—sometimes, as we see in his vigorous exhortations to the Churches he founded, that ‘holy impatience’ that is rightly called apostolic zeal. But he also suffered from “a thorn in the flesh” which he calls “a messenger from Satan” that was given to him to harass him and to keep him from becoming too elated. “Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me;” Saint Paul tells us. Moses was punished for striking the rock twice to bring forth water at Meribah. (cf. Nm 20:11). One can only wonder what the Lord thought of Saint Paul’s *three* demands!

Nevertheless, it is the Lord’s response to Saint Paul that is of profound importance: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-9) For here, as in the the Lord’s teaching to “Seek first [God’s] kingdom and His righteousness” we have the very stuff, the very fabric, of the virtue of patience, to the greater practice of which our antiphon calls us in this sacred season of Lent. If we seek God first and foremost, and rely on the power of His grace, everything else will follow in due course and in due time. The question “When?” does not need to arise, and need have no power over us, when I am immersed in doing *what* is necessary now: seeking God’s Kingdom and relying utterly on His grace.

This is not at all to promote the heresy of quietism whereby I do nothing but lie on the couch and expect God’s grace to get up and do the dishes, as it were! No, I must prepare myself for and be ever more open and attentive to the working of God’s grace in me and through me. Where necessary I must also remove obstacles to the working of God’s grace that are present in me—and if Lent is not the time to make ever more concerted efforts in this area, when is there?

For God's grace is not given to me to massage my ego or simply to console me in my sufferings (though it certainly does do the latter). Rather, God's grace is given to me in order to bear fruit—the fruit of the salvation of my soul and the salvation of the souls of others through my faithful witness to the truth in the circumstances of my particular vocation. Patience is not procrastination: I must get on with doing God's will, now, *in this acceptable time*, on this *day of salvation*.

Patience does not mean doing nothing. Patience is doing everything that can and must be done, but ensuring that those 'everythings' are ordered to seeking God's Kingdom and that they are undertaken with utter reliance on His grace and Providence, not as an exercise of self-aggrandisement.

In our new monastic foundation here we are sometimes tempted to ask, or to become preoccupied, about when this or that development will happen: When will the civil authorities grant permission for building works to commence? When will we have sufficient resources to actually commence the works? When will our newly planted fruit trees yield a good harvest? When will the next postulant arrive? When will our church finally be restored?

We must work towards achieving these ends to be sure, and do so diligently and with zeal, always relying on God's grace. But we must not be consumed with artificial deadlines of our own making. If our hopes and plans are in conformity with God's will, He will bring them to pass in His good time. It is not for us to know the day nor the hour (cf. Mt 25:13): our business is to get on with the tasks at hand and to *conduct ourselves as God's ministers, in much patience*.

Saint Benedict, in teaching on humility in the seventh chapter of the Rule, insists that his monks:

Meeting...with difficulties and contradictions and even injustice...should with a silent mind hold fast to patience, and enduring neither tire nor run away, for the Scripture saith: 'He that shall persevere to the end shall be saved.' And again: 'Let thy heart take courage and wait thou for the Lord.' And showing how the true disciple ought to endure all things, however contrary, for the Lord, it saith in the person of sufferers: 'For thy sake we are put to death all the day long. We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Then, confident in their hope of the divine reward, they go on with joy to declare: 'But in all these things we overcome, through him that hath loved us.' And again in another place the Scripture saith: 'Thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us by fire, as silver is tried. Thou hast brought us into the snare: thou hast laid afflictions on our back.' '... Moreover, in adversities and injuries they patiently fulfil the Lord's commands: when struck on one cheek they offer the other, when robbed of their tunic they surrender also their cloak, when forced to go a mile they go two, with the apostle Paul they bear with false brethren, and they bless those that curse them.

Monks, in seeking to conduct themselves *as God's ministers, in much patience*, persevere—they persevere unto the end. Perseverance is the fruit of the virtue of patience, a fruit that gives us truly vital nourishment and strength in this life. In this acceptable *time* of Lent, on this *day of salvation*, let us attend most diligently to the cultivation of the virtue of patience, for it is 'He that shall persevere to the end [who] shall be saved.'

IV. In ieiúniis, in vigíliis. *In fasting, in vigils.*

In these days therefore let us conduct ourselves as God's ministers...in fasting, in vigils...

It is all well and good to realise the importance of these days of Lent, and to consider how we need to improve our behaviour and indeed to work on the growth that is necessary in virtue of patience: we can do this quite comfortably really, making appropriate internal resolutions and external adjustments where necessary.

But we are also to engage...*in fasting* and *in vigils*. This is not a matter of improving our internal resolutions and of making appropriate adjustments in our behaviour. Fasting and vigils cut directly into our physical comfort. They attack the body, as it were, in the expectation that its slothful spirit will eventually toe the line and follow suit.

Some years ago His Eminence, Robert Cardinal Sarah, whilst on a brief visit to our diocese, addressed our seminarians. “I live in Rome,” he began. “And in Lent, in Rome, there is breakfast, there is lunch and there is dinner, every day,” he continued. “There is no fasting!” he exclaimed. Leaning over towards the seminarians, in a profoundly paternal tone he concluded: “You must fast.”

The problem His Eminence describes is by no means confined to Rome: one can dine very well indeed in some monasteries, religious houses, presbyteries and Catholic homes three times a day throughout Lent (of course I am not speaking of Sundays or of first-class feasts or of the necessary daily meal to sustain health and provide sufficient nourishment to work.) Fasting is a discipline which has all too easily been left behind by those who should know much better—much to the impoverishment of the life and mission of the Church in our times.

Why must we fast? The answer, I think, is to be found in the fact that fasting directly afflicts the body and its appetites, denying them as it were, refusing their demands and overturning the tyranny they so often exercise over us.

We know what it is to have eaten too much and how sluggish this can make us. We know that to drink too much numbs us and can sometimes lead to gravely irresponsible, illegal and sinful behaviours.

Fasting does exactly the opposite. Abstinence from food and alcohol attunes our heart, mind and soul to all that a surfeit of food and drink numbs, most especially the worship we owe to Almighty God. Fasting frees us precisely for this. I don’t fast because I may be fat: I fast because God is God and I am His creature and I owe Him the worship that is His due. Fasting enables us at least to approach Him more purely, more concentratedly, as it were.

So too, fasting enables me to do penance, to make reparation and to offer Almighty God a corporeal sacrifice. Sins of the flesh demand, in God’s justice, corporeal penance—and whom amongst us does not owe Almighty God a great deal in this respect? We can never do enough to repay the mercy we have received from Almighty God made possible for us by the bloody sacrifice of His Beloved Son on the Cross. Yes, His mercy is abundant, but in justice we must offer Him what penance we can, and in Lent (at least) according to Catholic tradition that means fasting.

Whilst all our fasting may never approach the quota of penance that is our due, we must not forget its positive efficacy. Fasting is a particularly potent offering that we can make to Almighty God for particular intentions—our own, or those of others. We often assure people that we shall pray for them. But we don’t often say that we shall offer our Friday or Wednesday fasts for them. Perhaps we think it to be too embarrassing; so be it. But the reality is that offering fasting proactively, as it were, *for* a particular intention, is an important (if undervalued) element of the Church’s ascetical tradition. There are many in the world caught up in the addictive tyranny of the sins of the flesh who desperately need the assistance our corporeal penance can bring. Again, Lent is most certainly the time to rediscover the efficacy of this radical Christian discipline.

Saint Benedict places “to love fasting” quite high on his list of the tools of good works which comprise chapter 4 of the Holy Rule. He doesn’t simply ask us to fast: he asks that we *love* fasting. Do we love it? *Dare* we love it?

The question really is “Dare we not?” For a monk who does not fast is unworthy of the name. Certainly, we must do so proportionately in accordance with our age, our health and the demands of manual work that are ours, but nevertheless we must fast. We must experience and embrace that physical discomfort that arises from corporeal self-denial. We must come to know that freedom which fasting gives us from sating our immediate appetites and desires. And we must have the opportunity to offer these corporeal acts in penance and in supplication to Almighty God because He is God and we, his sinful creatures, are ever mindful of the unmerited mercy we have received from Him.

As if fasting is not enough (!) we are also to engage in *in vigils*. I am not sure how many vigils there are in Rome these days—Cardinal Sarah never spoke of this (I suspect there are very few)—and in the Church today the concept of “a vigil” seems to have become that of anticipating Sunday Mass or matins at a more ‘convenient’ time on Saturday afternoon or evening so as to leave Sunday morning free for something other than the worship of Almighty God. The ancient concept of a vigil being a whole day of prayer and fasting preceding a great feast, and of a subsequent night-long watch for dawn permeated with the singing of psalms and of readings from Sacred Scripture seems long since to have been lost.

So much so, indeed, that on a recent fraternal visit to another Benedictine monastery, our brethren experienced their monastic hosts recoil in disbelief when they confessed—upon interrogation—that matins is celebrated here at 03h30 every morning. What was relatively common monastic practice but some decades ago is, for many, incomprehensible today.

To be sure, 03h30 is very early, and it is a substantial daily sacrifice—sometimes a truly difficult one. But it is also a real and a truly beautiful offering that we can each make to Almighty God. Again, we can do so in penance, for our sins or for those of others. So too we can offer our presence and participation at matins for particular intentions. (I like to say that this is particularly efficacious because most people aren't praying to God at that time, and so our prayers at matins 'get through' more easily as it were!) And indeed, we can offer matins to the Almighty simply because He is God and we, His creatures, owe Him the most perfect love and worship we can give.

The matins bell calls us well beyond our instinctual comfort-zone and into the very heart of the monastic vocation as one who puts behind the world and in doing so becomes attentive first and foremost to God, and as one who keeps vigil, who watches throughout the night for the dawn, for the coming of Christ, the Morning Star, whose light is the light of life.

In truth, whilst beds are warm and early mornings (and 11th century Romanesque churches!) can be very cold, matins and the still, golden silence that follows it and which consecrates the best hours of the day to *lectio divina*—that unhurried digestion of the divine realities about which Almighty God and His friends have spoken in the Sacred Liturgy, Sacred Scripture and other venerable texts—is one of the most beautiful elements of our vocation. Yes, it most certainly requires discipline, but once one accepts the cost, and does so lovingly, because God is God, its rewards are sweeter than one could ever have imagined.

“Let us rise in the night to praise Him,” Saint Benedict enjoins us, borrowing the words of Psalm 118, so that we may “render praise to our Creator for the judgements of his justice.” (Rule, ch. 16)

The keeping of vigils may well shock monks in our day, even more than fasting might be foreign to many even outside of Rome. But in this *acceptable time*, on this *day of salvation*; in *these days* of Lent, the tradition of the Church in general and monastic tradition in particular call us to *conduct ourselves as God's ministers...in fasting and in vigils*. Let us be attentive to that call, lest the *day of salvation* come and go, and leave us behind without our having profited from it.

V. Et in caritate non ficta.
And in charity that is not false.

In these days therefore let us conduct ourselves as God's ministers ... in charity that is not false.

When someone exhorts us to a practice that is *not* false, one may reasonably presume that there has been or is a problem of falsehood that they are seeking to correct. Given that our Lenten antiphon is probably at least a thousand years old, and that the phrase “caritate non ficta” is Saint Paul's (2 Cor. 6:7), we may reasonably assert that this problem is quite an ancient one.

But is it a modern one? Is false charity a problem today? If one follows the modern *Liturgy of the Hours*, which omits this phrase entirely from the dismembered parts of our antiphon that it uses elsewhere in Lent, one might presume not. However, with all due respect to the optimism of the liturgical reformers, I suspect we may be wise to stick with Saint Paul and liturgical tradition on this, for false charity, charity that is counterfeit, “cheap grace” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once described it, has by no means been banished from the Church or the world of our times.

What is charity? Many tomes have been written in answer to this question and we would do well to study Saint Thomas Aquinas and the other venerable doctors' expositions of this virtue given to us at our Holy Baptism. But for the sake of our time of retreat, let a simple recapitulation suffice: “Charity is the theological virtue by which we love

God above all things for His own sake, and our neighbour as ourselves for the love of God.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1822)

To “love God above all things for His own sake”, and to love “our neighbour as ourselves for the love of God”—there are more than enough implications here to sustain our contemplation for many Lents and beyond. But this Lent, this Ember Saturday of Lent, I propose that we use the lens of St Paul to focus our recollection: we are explicitly called to avoid the practice of false charity.

In his 2009 Encyclical *Caritas in veritate* Pope Benedict XVI taught that “*Only in truth does charity shine forth*, only in truth can charity be authentically lived. Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity.” (n. 3) “A Christianity of charity without truth would be more or less interchangeable with a pool of good sentiments, helpful for social cohesion, but of little relevance. In other words, there would no longer be any real place for God in the world,” (n. 4) he continued.

Pope Benedict’s encyclical is of itself worthy of careful study, of course, but for our purposes today let us be clear about two things. Firstly, that charity without truth is little more than a sentimental irrelevance. Put another way, if we think that being charitable is being “nice”, well, that is...nice, but it is not much more. At best it is shallow. At worst—most particularly when our niceness hides, or is at the expense of, the truth—it is deceptive.

Saint Benedict, thankfully, is not nice. His Rule insists that superiors correct and punish faults and wrongdoing and do all that they can to eradicate bad habits before they take root in the life of the monk or the monastery. Saint Benedict commands ‘tough love’ as it were; that is, he insists on that love of our neighbour as ourselves for the love of God which requires our neighbour’s correction so that he will stop his wrongdoing, abandon the path that leads to perdition, and advance instead on the path to salvation.

Sentimental niceness that turns a blind eye to falsehood, evil and sin has no place in the Rule of Saint Benedict and it should have no place in monasteries that claim to be his sons. Nor does it have any place in the life of the Church—from the cathedra of the bishop to the hearth of every Christian home. *Caritate non ficta* requires dealing with the truth, with the realities involved in matter to hand. It demands that tough love which does not make excuses but gets on with the business of moving forward—with correction, repentance and due penance where these are necessary.

Secondly, we need to be clear that “*Only in truth does charity shine forth*, only in truth can charity be authentically lived.” To divorce truth from charity is to give birth to a lie. We see this in current times in respect of the Church’s teaching on the reception of the Blessed Eucharist, the sanctity of Christian marriage, on sexual morality, on the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ for salvation, and so on. People who find these teachings difficult in some way or another (that is, their lives have been lived contrary to them) or who feel themselves excluded by them, are often proffered so-called “pastoral” solutions in ‘charity,’ but without truth.

But this is nothing other than false charity precisely because it is not grounded in the truth. Charity calls sin, sin, and calls the sinner to conversion for the love of Almighty God and the salvation of the sinner’s soul. False charity obfuscates the truth and hides its demands from the sinner who, because of this hiding of the truth, may never hear the call to conversion that could bring them to repentance and salvation.

We must not become pharisaic about this: we are all sinners and know only too well that but for the grace of God any one of us could today be in a terrible situation spiritually and morally. We must be humble in our gratitude for the grace of the conversion of life we have been given. But in and from that humility we must practice the real charity of witnessing to the truth of its demands. Our baptismal vocation demands nothing less. Our monastic or ordained vocation builds on this and makes our witness to truth even more imperative for our own salvation.

At this point we may be in danger of becoming a little too academic, I fear. We need to understand what *caritate non ficta* means, certainly, but this Ember Day retreat is primarily a time for self-examination and prayer more than it is for study of the question *per se*. Let us return to ourselves.

The opening words of the Prologue of the Rule address each one of us, even more poignantly in Lent as we pray for the grace to live *caritate non ficta*:

“Hearken my son, to the precepts of thy master and incline the ear of thy heart; freely receive and faithfully fulfil the instructions of thy loving father, that by the labour of obedience thou mayest return to him from whom thou hast strayed by the sloth of disobedience...”

We may be used to considering these words as addressed to an aspirant to the monastic life—and certainly they are—but no matter how many months, years or decades we have been in the enclosure they continue to call us anew to that real conversion of life that lives the truth and reflects it in all of our activities. Our vocation is a singular grace, but we must live it *in caritate non ficta*—and when falsehood, sin, disobedience to Almighty God, or anything else detracts from our living according to the truth, we must repent, do penance and amend our lives. If I give an honest answer to the question “Am I living according to the truth of Christ?” on this Ember Day, and am willing to face up to and act upon the real consequences of the answer, I shall have taken many steps forward in *caritate non ficta*.

Lest we become complacent, by way of warning Saint Benedict continues in the Prologue praying that Almighty God:

“may never be provoked by our evil conduct. For we must always so serve Him with the gifts which He has given us, that He may never as an angry Father disinherit His children, not yet as our dread Lord be driven by our sins to cast into everlasting punishment the wicked servants who would not follow Him to glory.”

Do we wish to follow Him to everlasting glory? Presumably the answer is affirmative. But it may also be a little sentimental, without much foundation as it were, without costing us terribly much.

Saint Paul, Saint Benedict, liturgical tradition and Our Lord Himself demand, rather, that our charity be real and grounded in the truth. Let us not shrink from the substantial demands it makes of us in respect of the conversion of our lives, particularly in this sacred season of Lent. For *behold, now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation; in these days therefore let us conduct ourselves as God’s ministers, in much patience, in fasting, in vigils, and in charity that is not false.*