

Handbook for Heaven

*Forty Days with the Cross of Christ
and the
Daily Mass Readings for the Season of Lent
led by St. Gaspar del Bufalo*



Reflections by Fr. Jeffrey Keyes, C.P.P.S.

Ash Wednesday

The Readings

Joel 2:12-18,	Rend your hearts, and not your garments.
Psalms 51,	Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.
2 Cor. 5:20-6:2	Be Reconciled To God.
Matt 6: 1-6, 16-18	Your Father, who sees all that is done in secret, will reward you.

St. Gaspar

This year, our examination at the foot of the Cross, shall center in a particular way on three points. First, the acknowledgment of our shortcomings from which arises our deficiency before God. Secondly, the examination of our observance of interior discipline,¹ which may be called *Manuductio ad Coelum*.² Finally, we shall direct our attention, prudently and reflectively, to the external aspects of our apostolic work, not merely to have a knowledge of good in general, but to seek the greater good which can and must be furthered... this searching will make us eager to find the means for the attainment of our purpose. These means are threefold: a continuous inner conversation with God about our needs and interests; a deep study of humility, that we may be capable of receiving special gifts from God for the renewal of our life; and a burning desire for the inner and hidden life in the adorable wounds of the Crucified.³

Reflection

Lent is about reform. Today's Gospel is basically a summary of practices, disciplines that can form the basis of any relationship. Honest and direct communication, fasting from my own agenda so that I might listen, and works of kindness and helpfulness will build any relationship. Jesus seek to reform our attitudes. He wants to take us beyond these external practices and lead us deeper into a relationship that is intimate, alive and personal. Striving for virtue for its own sake closes us in upon ourselves. On the other hand, a self-less act of charity uncovers and reveals a solidarity and experience of community that is the core of Jesus' desire.

Lent reforms the ground of our hearts and minds in much the same way as winter reforms the earth. Each year this discipline plants us at the foot of the cross that we might see what fruits may grow. Jesus send us to our rooms, not for punishment, but that he might nourish us with the rewards of his friendship. St. Gaspar calls us away on retreat not just that we might examine our ministry, but that we might seek the greater good, that conversation with God as with a friend. It is the disciplines proper to personal and familial friendships and relationships that will renew our lives.

- Do I need to find a new interior discipline or renew an old one?
- Where has winter transformed my life?
- Where am I most in need of reform?
- Where are we most in need of reform?

¹ Cf. Rule, Title II

² Handbook for Heaven

³ From the Third Circular Letter, 1829

- What are the disciplines proper to personal relationships, and how might I exercise these disciplines with Jesus?

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

The Readings

Deut. 30:15-20	I set before you life or death. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.
Psalms 1	Happy are they who hope in the Lord
Luke 9: 22-25	Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps.

St. Gaspar

Let all things be stepping-stones to heaven. Deny your own will and accept the bitter things for sweet and the sweet for bitter, and you will be saints. Whoever sows the field, sows with fatigue and labor. In the field of the Gospel, we sow with patience and suffering.

Did you think perhaps, that Community life would be free from crosses? You deceive yourselves. Did you perhaps enter the Society from human motives and not divine --- to escape reproaches at home, to rid yourselves of the yoke of paternal authority, to evade labor in the fields, to suffer no deprivation in your life, and the like? If you love the Society, my dear Brothers, change your minds. Look into yourselves and if you admire virtue, as it exists in others, then you too should practice it incessantly. Let the Society and every one of its members be dear to you. Put aside all hatred, aversion, prejudice and pride. In their place put charity, docility, humility, prudence and a sincere desire for the success of the Community where you are in service. In short, let the Society be your way to heaven, Amen.⁴

Reflection

The disciples of Jesus were focused on power. They lived in hope of a powerful messiah that would free them from the oppression of life. Jesus was to become victorious, not through power but through suffering. Jesus urged them to change their minds. Some of St. Gaspar's brothers were looking for a superficial freedom in religious life. They wanted the religious community to make them holy, or happy or successful. Gaspar told them clearly, "change your minds."

Our world is focused on power, or wealth or good looks. We depend on many of these things to make us happy or successful. It can sound inhuman to deny our own will. It can seem unhealthy to suffer willingly. Yet relationships do not happen if I insist on remaining more powerful than the other. Intimacy cannot happen if I insist on my own way. Communion can happen if I am honest about my own weakness and strength and give of myself completely in love, rather than holding a position of strength.

The Lenten reform begun yesterday is about changing hearts, minds, and ways of life. We took up our cross of ashes and stepped forward to choose a life that lives beyond ashes and death. This was a choice for life, not the superficial things that make life easy. This was a choice that conforms our will to God's will, even if that means struggle or suffering.

⁴ The First Circular Letter, 1826

Today is a new day with a new choosing. A Lent well begun has to be confirmed daily. That daily cross is not simply enduring whatever comes, but actively taking up the cross in actions of charity and patience. St. Gaspar teaches that the person next to us is our way to heaven. This is where we change our hearts and minds from judgment to acceptance. This is where we choose life in actions of patience, humility and charity.

- About what or whom is the Lord asking me to "change my mind?"
- Do I expect my spouse, family, religious community, parish, or church to fulfill all my hopes and dreams?
- In what small way today can I take up actions for life, for justice, for charity?

Friday after Ash Wednesday

The Readings

Isaiah 58: 1-9	This is the fasting I desire.
Psalms 51,	A heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn.
Matt 9:14-15	Time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, then they will fast.

St. Gaspar

"God, indeed, who brings things to maturity, requires us to be patient for his works are generated and cultivated through thorns, crosses, and all sorts of hardships that accompany a ministry of the primary and essential relationship in the Church of Jesus Christ. "Faith comes through hearing..."⁵

With regard to periods of fasting, this can be examined at a later time. In the meantime, their interior attitudes should be set deeply within, like mysterious roots of mystical plants. Allow them to grow to maturity, *and all things in due time*.⁶ For the time being, therefore, they should adapt to a mitigated rule to rescue them from the sense of guilt. We shall climb Jacob's ladder very gradually, step by step.⁷

Reflection

On this the first of the Friday's in Lent the readings emphasize the ancient discipline of fasting. Jesus indicates to the Pharisees that they are asking the wrong question. They were concerned about an exterior practice. The ancient prophet had described fasting as communion with those most in need, and now Jesus invites them to pay attention to an essential and primary relationship with the bridegroom. Clearly fasting has something to do with relationship, relationship with those in need and relationship with the Lord.

When involved in any relationship it is often true that we must fast from our own ideas and opinions in order to listen to another. We have to let go of our own expectations in order to receive the other as they are, not as we imagine them to be. If we live in a land of plenty and

⁵ Letter 946 to Cristaldi, August 20, 1824

⁶ et omnia cum tempore

⁷ letter 739, July 7, 1823, to Msgr. Carlo Manassi, Bishop of Priverno, Sezze and Terracina

anything is available to us anytime we want it, we are filled, satisfied, in need of nothing and no one else. If we fast from these things, possibly we could hunger for something greater, more satisfying.

So then, fasting is deeply connected with what Gaspar calls a primary and essential relationship with Christ. The readings and prayers from the tradition ensure that we know the meaning of these ancient practices. These are not practices to be pursued so that we might be perfect in penitential practice, but as a means to our on-going conversion to the Lord. It is less important that we fulfill ancient discipline than that the fasting lead us to this essential relationship. It is more than abstaining from food and drink. It is also sharing that food with the poor, and acting on behalf of justice. The presence of Jesus in our lives has enormous consequences for how we live, and St. Gaspar invites us to take up the hardships that accompany the building of the Kingdom of God. Fasting is not easy, and we shy away from it in this land of plenty. Relationships are not easy either and we can be tempted to shy away from the hard work. St. Gaspar assures us the way to heaven is strewn with thorns and crosses, but they lead us to this primary relationship. We enter more deeply into our Lenten fast, knowing that this practice must also include practical help for others, establishing the justice God's heart desires.

- What am I giving up for Lent this year?
- How might I direct this fast toward God?
- What would it be like to hunger for God alone?

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

The Readings

Isaiah 58:9-14	...not following your own pursuits.
Psalms 86	Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth..
Luke 5, 27-32	I have not come to invite the just to a change of heart, but sinners.

St. Gaspar⁸

Strive, dearly beloved, that “always wherever we may be we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus.”⁹ At the time you became members of the Society, perhaps the world with scorn and derision sought to make you falter in your determination. Satan, too, desired that the love of comfort, attachment to your own opinions, rudeness in conduct, and self-will should replace your good resolutions and a life of service to God. What, then, did the good Lord do? He showed you a way to ground yourselves in humility, obedience, and sacrifice in the hidden and modest life. He rejoices to hear you repeat: “I have chosen to be an abject in the house of my God.”¹⁰

⁸ From the Third Circular Letter, 1829

⁹ 2 Cor 4:10

¹⁰ Gaspar is quoting from the Vulgate from Psalm 83:11 “Elegi abjectus esse” which the Douay translates I have chosen to be an abject in the house of my God, rather than to dwell in the tabernacles of sinners. Modern translations from the original languages have a slightly different sense, “Better the threshold of the house of my God than a home in the tents of the wicked.”

Reflection

Levi left everything, got up, and followed Jesus. To become a follower, he had to leave everything behind. He had to become poor to follow Jesus. You and I may not have to leave house, home and family and job in order to follow Jesus, but St. Gaspar invites us to consider other things we might consider leaving behind. What if, to follow Jesus today, I have to leave behind and let go of attachments to my own opinions? Would this allow me to let go of some anxiety or the need to succeed? Would this give me more time to work quietly and consider God's ways? We get up and follow his way, letting go our own pursuits. Each of us has formed attachments. We hold on to things that bring us comfort, or security. It may be as simple as the daily cup of coffee. or it may be a judgment or opinion we have of our spouse, co-worker, or fellow religious. These attachments are finite. We have fallen in love with created things and God would like us to fall in love with him. He came to call sinners, but in order to follow we have to leave many things behind.

The foundation for this is Jesus himself. This is his call, his way, his will. Jesus "took off" his divinity in order to come to us. He left the glory of heaven to spend time with us on earth. He became poor that we might become rich. We are invited to have the same attitude that is found in Jesus, *who though he was in the form of God did not deem equality with God as something to be exploited.*¹¹

The focus is not simply on Levi's becoming poor. He also became rich as Jesus filled his heart with desire. Jesus calls us too, to an ever-deepening conversion, responding to his invitation. He will not leave us in our poverty, but invites us to the feast in the kingdom too.

- What is my deepest desire?
- What emotions, pursuits, or opinions can I let go of?
- Where might God's invitation lead me today?

First Sunday of Lent (A)

The Readings

Gen 2:7-9, 3:1-7,	The temptation and fall of Adam and Eve.
Psalms 51:	Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned
Romans 5:12-19:	For just as through the disobedience of one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous.
Matthew 4:1-11	The temptation of Jesus in the desert

St. Gaspar¹²

In applying the means which I have just proposed - means that furnish us with those weapons of fight which we should constantly employ against the infernal host - we will not lack temptations of fear, reluctance, sloth or anger. They will disturb our spirit in order to blind us to the importance of the priesthood, to withhold from us whatever is conducive to its success, and to discourage us in the face of opposition. But let us be united in our endeavor to conquer

¹¹ Phil 2:5

¹² From the Third Circular letter

the flatteries and deceptions of the tempter lest we “at any time let my enemy say: I have prevailed against him.”¹³ Since the demon is incessantly bent upon defeating every good work, how many more efforts will he not make towards hindering the great work of our apostolate? On the other hand, let us always keep in mind, “There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength.”¹⁴ “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?”¹⁵

Reflection

St. Gaspar is speaking to priests, to his fellow missionaries, but these principles are important for all of us. He reminds us that even though we have the means to fight the wiles of the Adversary, there will still be times of temptation. There has not been a great deal said about the devil lately. Too often he is dismissed as something from our childhood faith. As a result in our own culture the term temptation is dismissed as something insignificant or is limited to things like candy, chocolate, alcohol and sex. When we pray, “lead us not into temptation” we are asking God to keep us away from the fundamental choice between life and death. We have already chosen life, life in Christ, but there is still much to distract us, to lead us away from that choice.

There were three temptations thrown at Jesus in today’s gospel. He is tempted to find meaning and security in something that is not God, He is tempted to make God prove his love by some supernatural sign, and he is tempted by power. He confronts the struggle with evil, armed with the Word of God. This is not simply knowledge of a text. He is in an intimate relationship with the Father, a relationship so close that he IS the Word. St. Gaspar knew more than the text. He was in a deep relationship with the Word of God, so much so that in every letter what he says reflects his experience with the Scriptures.

This Lent we are called into a deeper relationship with God through prayer, meditation on the Word of God, and works of charity. It is this relationship with the Word of God as a person that will be our strength in our confrontation with evil in our life. Lent is a time to prepare Catechumens to be received into the faith, and it is a time for believers to prepare to renew their baptismal vows, to once again renounce Satan and profess allegiance to the God of life. One way to do this would be to open the scripture more, to spend time with them, and to go beyond the written text to the one who is the Word of God.

- What are my excuses for not reading and praying the scriptures daily?
- What are the distractions or temptations that lead me away from my relationship with God?
- How do I confront evil in my own life?

13 Psalm 13:5

14. Phil 4:13

15 Rom 8:35

First Sunday of Lent (B)

The Readings

Genesis 9:8-15	God's covenant with Noah
Psalms 25	Your ways O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.
1 Peter 3:18-22	Deliverance of Noah from the flood prefigures baptism.
Mark 1:12-25	Jesus is tempted in the desert.

St. Gaspar

In the Holy Scriptures, he asserts that he only permits us to be tempted in order to allow us the opportunity for gaining merits for heaven. Furthermore, that it is not possible for him to abandon anyone who confides in him, who loves him tenderly or who is in concordance with the desires of his most gentle heart. Yes. What wrong one does against God by being immoderately fearful of Lucifer's assaults. We are fragile, weak reeds, that is true; but, the powerful right arm of the Omnipotent God makes us become robust plants with the power to gallantly resist the complete fury of the winds. The whole Gospel message and the life of our Lord inspires us to have nothing other than Christian confidence, generosity of heart and magnanimity of soul.¹⁶

Reflection

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry we hear a whisper of a future conflict. Straight from the waters of his baptism in the Jordan, hearing the words, "This is my beloved," he is immediately thrust into the desert.

There is a hint of the future. The reign of God will be opposed as is evidenced by the handing over of John. Soon Jesus will begin speaking about his own "handing over" but the disciples never seem to want to listen to that. They are not aware, or they forget, that this conflict is the prelude to the whole contest. All too soon, Jesus himself will be targeted for this "handing over."

Jesus had to be prepared for this contest, so the "Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

The wilderness, reputed to be the home of darkness and disorder, and wild beasts, symbols of the foreign, the alien and the strange: It is in the very home of evil that evil is overcome. It is not by being taken away from evil that evil is conquered, it is mastered in the midst of the disorder and the darkness, and the very strange bestial forms become symbols of the new age. In the messianic new age, these evil, bestial forces will have no power. *The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.*¹⁷

Jesus enters into Galilee with great confidence, not beaten down by the desert experience, but strong and direct in his proclamation of the Gospel. St. Gaspar wants us to rise from our deserts with the same confidence. Temptation will not defeat us if we depend with ever growing confidence of the Redeemer.

We profess to be followers of Christ. We profess to be in him, to be the elect. Experience has taught us, as it taught the early disciples, that we will be faced with disappointments,

¹⁶ letter 46, February-April, 1813, to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi

¹⁷ Isaiah 11:6

disagreements and even defeat. We start our experience of spring by proclaiming that there will be an end to this winter of defeat, just as there was an end to Jesus' 40 days in the desert. The Temptations and the tests will pass. We can expect no more than Jesus received. We expect that because of our basic life decision in Jesus for God, that, at the bare minimum, we will be handed over to the court of public opinion.

But we enter these 40 days, nonetheless, because we are in Jesus. And it is time to face the choice again. To whom does our life belong? Will we be victim of every defeat and disappointment, or will our lives become signs of the "*covenant that is between God and us and every living creature....; and the waters shall never again become a [sign of a] flood to destroy all flesh,*"(Gen.9:15) but rather a sign of new birth into This Christ who is victorious over every test, even death itself.

- How do my actions show that my life has been handed over to Jesus?
- Where in my life do I need to make room for St. Gaspar's confidence?
- Where might I express in my words and actions that evil has been overcome?

First Sunday of Lent (C)

The Readings

Deut 26:4-10	The struggle of ancient Israel in the desert.
Psalms 91	Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.
Romans 10:8-13	The word is near, in your mouth and in your heart.
Luke 4:1-13	The Temptation of Jesus in the desert.

St. Gaspar¹⁸

The wine cellar is fitted with a wine press to squeeze out the juice of the grapes in order to obtain from them those precious wines which we have been speaking of until now. Indeed, using the wine cellar as a type, was not the Heart of Jesus put under the wine press of a most cruel suffering? And, does not all the profit which comes from his sufferings - to make an application from our comparison - flow from that source into our souls? *I have trodden the winepress alone. Of the men of my people not one was with me.*¹⁹ My beloved in Jesus Christ, it is time for us to submit the vineyard of our souls to cultivation, to toil willingly under the pressure of present trials. The love of Jesus, represented by the wine, will take away our lethargy, will provide against our dejection, and will give us strength and comfort for the journey to our dear home in heaven, where we shall rejoice triumphantly without end. Let these sentiments be impressed upon the minds and hearts of each one of us. Let the image of the wine cellar remind us to fulfill our obligations by corresponding to a God most lavish with his gifts. With our thoughts concentrated on a most accurate examination of ourselves, may he animate us toward the cure of our spiritual maladies. May he help us aim at the sublimest degrees of sanctity. Since the King of Glory has brought us into this banquet hall, let us establish here our own peaceful abode in time. Also, let us re-enforce the foundations of the holy city of God with the bonds of charity. Let us remember that the nuptial bed of the peace-loving King is the Cross, and, that our souls upon this nuptial bed yearn for the most tender

¹⁸ Fifth Circular Letter, 1831

¹⁹ Is 63:3

embraces of affection toward Jesus. He has redeemed us through love, has shed all his Blood in love, and through him we have a mystical dwelling in his heart. *The king has taken me to his banquet hall, and the banner he raises over me is love.*²⁰

Reflection

We do not like to be in trouble. The desert is a lonely place. We despise difficulties, and we abhor struggle and hardship. There has to be some medicine for this headache. There needs to be found some escape. Can not there be an easier way than this. We fill our lives with so much activity, noise, entertainment, possessions, anything to avoid the pains and the difficulties of life. Everything is designed to give us relief, and to make our life easier. How do you spell relief?

Love is not easy and easy love never endures. To truly love one must give of themselves, letting go of demands and judgments and opinions and expectations. We struggle to do this, but this is precisely who Jesus is and what Jesus does.

We do not imagine a God who struggles. We find it difficult to be with Jesus when he is in trouble, but he struggles to find a way to our hearts, and he is troubled by our distance from him.

He faces the struggle directly. He does not shrink away. He shows us the tools he uses to stand against the winds and shadows of this world. In the face of evil he holds up the word of God. This is not just a collection of words or a quoting of scripture in the wind, but an immersion in the truth that there is more to life than bread, and that serving God benefits us with his grace. The Word of God here is the expression of a living, direct, tangible, personal, human, intimate relationship with God.

He calls us to the desert to face our struggles directly, emboldened by his confidence, armed with his word and strengthened and nourished by his blood.

- What are the present trials and struggle to which Jesus and Gaspar have called me?
- What are the medicines and distractions I use to avoid the struggles and pains of life?
- How would I describe my commitment to knowing the Word of God intimately?

Monday of the First Week

The Readings

Lev. 19:1-2,11-18 The demands of justice for our neighbor.
Psalm 19 Your words, Lord, are spirit and life.
Matt 25:31-46 What you did for the least, you did for me.

St. Gaspar

“I would like charity to be forever the queen of my heart.”²¹

²⁰ Song 2:4

²¹ (to Fr. Pietro Butti June 8, 1826, letter 1436 Resources 11, pg. 4)

"Charity toward one's neighbor.... shown to every individual...."²²

Let us pray to God that he bless the means we use, that we never become discouraged because of the difficulties encountered in carrying them out. Sometimes, when we are engaged in these holy pursuits, we are called upon to suffer something; but all will be softened by the holy faith that we profess. If someone wishes to crack a nut, using his teeth, he is not concerned with the pain that he might experience, because he is thinking of the delicious kernel that he will soon feast upon. This anxiety alone makes him satisfied and he does not in the least complain. Let us make an adaptation of this to spiritual things and we will profit from it. Jesus recognizes as done to himself whatever is done to the poor, the object of his love. In fact, on judgment day, he will ask us whether we gave him something to drink when he was thirsty, something to eat when he was hungry etc. and all the rest that is recorded in the holy Gospel. This should serve as a comfort in the exercise of our good works. God keeps an account of everything; now is the time for planting, in spite of any inclemency in the weather or so many other deterrents. In short, the time will soon come for the harvest which we will present to the master of the vineyard so that he can bless us for all eternity.²³

Reflection

Who is the least among us? Do we have anyone in our family who is hungry for respect? Is our co-worker thirsty for understanding or acceptance? Is there a neighbor stripped of friendship or family or who is imprisoned by ignorance or past wounds? Have we learned how to recognize the face of Jesus in our neighborhood, or do we react with judgment, dismiss with anger or ignore with disdain?

The "least" may include ourselves. There may be preciousness in us that we have failed to recognize or honor. What thirst or hunger in us have we covered over or ignored? It is possible to reject the Christ in oneself also.

God has come to us to live in our midst. *He came to his own and his own received him not.* He has given us a clear picture of where we might find him. Somehow the expectation remains that we discover him in the successful, the powerful or otherwise "blessed" people of this world. Yet he who left everything to be with us still beckons us to search his wounds and find him in the midst of our own poverty and humility.

We cannot say that there are no poor among us. They may be in our own home and they even may be ourselves. Nor can we ignore the materially poor or simply instruct them to get a job or judge that it is their own fault. There are many in our neighborhood who have limited resources, have no insurance, and who live one paycheck away from homelessness. These many could be us if we had succumbed to the many traumas this world provides. A cynical, judgmental attitude simply does not find its home in the gospel. Only the vulnerability of self gift and generosity find their reflection in the face of Jesus.

The word was made flesh and dwelt among us. This is central to our identity as Christians.

²² to Fr. A. Pascucci January 1827, letter 1555 Resources 11, pg. 4

²³ Letter 50, February-April, 1813, to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi

Flesh has been raised to an incomparable dignity, and blood is precious. How we behave toward the flesh and blood around us is how we behave toward the Lord himself.

The Lord is directing us to more than isolated acts of almsgiving, but is ordering us to a way of life that is directed toward others and lived for others. Our love for God must take concrete, tangible form. For St. Gaspar this attention to others finds expression in several of his letters. Regardless of trials in his life he was determined to make charity forever the queen of his heart. This charity was to be shown to everyone, without exception.

- What are some of the ways I might address the thirst of this world?
- Why are independence and self-reliance important values for me?
- What act of helpfulness, kindness or charity must I do today?

Tuesday of the First Week

The Readings

Isaiah 55:10-11, The Word drenches the earth, bearing fruit, doing God's will.
Psalm 34 From all their distress God rescues the just.
Matt 6:7-15, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray.

St. Gaspar

"The more one prays, the more good can be done."²⁴

"Let us develop everything by the use of prayer."²⁵

"Prayer and confidence in God's goodness must be the anchor of our salvation and the Lord's peace must always abound in our souls."²⁶

"Especially let us be strong in mental prayer, the food and life of the soul. May our lives be holy and productive of holiness."²⁷

Here, then, is the method which I would like to have you adopt:

1. After the noon meal, no application of the mind. Rather, a visit to the church, a bit of a walk into the countryside at a scheduled time, and a few soft, ejaculatory prayers will be sufficient, or, a brief glance into your relationship with God as seen through all things. It will be useful for you to sing the praises of the things of God, as found, for example, in the Psalms etc.; but also, a bit of the customary repose, since you are obliged likewise to preserve your health.

2. Meditations made from books are no longer your thing, but, rather, at an opportune time in the morning to place yourself in a state of silence. Do nothing, but only listen to the voice of God. You might say: "Lord, here I am at your beck and call." Allow your heart to speak with God, uttering its deep affection; do not get into reflective thoughts, except those

²⁴ May 12, 1821, letter 424, to Fr. Giovanni Caroni, Resources - 4, pg. 15

²⁵ September 5, 1821, letter 467, to Fr. Adriano Maria Tarulli, Resources -4 , pg. 16

²⁶ from Letter No. 110 to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, October 22, 1814

²⁷ from Letter No. 183 to Fr. Angelo Antonini, November 7, 1818

that God himself arouses; rather, say: Lord speak to your servant ... oh would that I had always loved you." Then, look with tender glances at the crucifix and be filled with sentiments of confidence and trust in the Lord.

3. Offer only a few vocal prayers. Maintain a continuous realization of the presence of God; utter continual stream of aspirations as an incessant plea in the presence of God.

4. However, be occupied also in external works ... the Oratory ... the sick. All of this, of course, depending on your strength. Try this method for a bit, and you will begin to see the effects.²⁸

Reflection

The Lord teaches his disciples to pray. Prayer is so central to this intimate relationship. This prayer he teaches is so simple, we learn this as children. It is so complete, the ancients call it the summary of the whole gospel and use it as an outline for their treatises on Prayer. So direct and intimate it is addressed to "Abba". How comfortable are we to call God, "daddy"? Sometimes we seem to have trouble using such familial terms with God so we resort to the more proper and formal "Father". Jesus rests easily and trustfully in that intimate communion with his Father, and he, in this prayer, gives us too the capacity for God. We can scarcely contain the whole world, yet we have been given the privilege of being home for God. This intimate communion with God and the realization of his mercy leads us to forgiveness of others and communion with all. For St. Gaspar prayer was the key to everything, to heaven itself. It was the anchor.²⁹ It would accomplish everything and nothing could be accomplished without it.

- Describe how it feels to be able to speak with God as with a friend?
- What do I want to accomplish this week? How have I made prayer part of the plans?
- How do I hear the call to service and forgiveness in this prayer?

Wednesday of the First Week

The Readings

Jonah 3:1-10	God sends Jonah to preach to Nineveh
Psalms 51	A heart contrite and humbled heart, O God, you will not spurn.
Luke 11:29-32	No sign given except the sign of Jonah

St. Gaspar

"Let us praise God who makes use of the weakest of instruments for the great work of his glory"³⁰

Sometimes the means that seem to us to be the weakest are the ones that God makes use of for the great works of his glory, and from the lives of the saints this appears to be quite evident. Stress to all that they are to pray and offer frequent prayers; that they often kiss the wounds of

²⁸ (to Mr. Giovanni Francesco Palmucci, June 28, 1826, letter 1451)

²⁹ See page 15 of SPI

³⁰ Letter to Fr. Domenico Silvestri, March 16, 1827, letter 1590

Jesus (at least in spirit); that from time to time they mentally return to Calvary; that they consider their own wretchedness - and any other thoughts that you find helpful according to the needs that those souls have.³¹

“A Book to be read. It is the Crucifix.”³²

Reflection

The book of Jonah is an amazing story. Since no sign except the Sign of Jonah will be given this generation, it is important to read and understand this whole story. There is a great deal more to this prophet than just three days in the belly of a whale. Jonah was an irreverent and disobedient Hebrew prophet. The pagan sailors had a greater respect for life and reverence for God. God desired repentance. Jonah preached destruction. Still God accomplishes his purpose through the prophet Jonah. God’s instructions to Jonah were very clear and even at the end of the story Jonah does not get it. Still God is compassionate and so at the end is gently respecting Jonah’s feelings while quietly reminding Jonah of the truth.

The Sign of Jonah is not some mystical vision or magical locution. We don't trust in magic or long for grand occurrences. The Sign of Jonah is the presence of God in unlikely places. God is found in foreign lands and among foreign people. He is found among the stranger, the pagan, the enemy. He is found in our struggles, our difficulties and in our sorrows. He is found in the crucified one. God reveals himself in second chances, remaining faithful to his word yet accomplishing his work even through the disobedient. The intensity of God's love is for all people, as well as plants, and the cattle. For St. Gaspar, reading the book of the cross was a place to find the sign of Jonah. In Jonah God accomplishes his work through the weakest of servants and on the Cross God is revealed in the presence of a beaten, broken, condemned criminal. The cross was the unlikely place to find God. It is there we find mercy in his blood.

- Where in my weakness and disobedience might I find the presence and action of God?
- Where do I need the greatest change?
- How might I allow God to use me for the great work of his glory?

Thursday of the First Week

The Readings

Esther C: 12, 14-16, 23-25 Queen Esther took refuge in Prayer
Psalm 138 Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me.
Matthew 7:7-12 Ask and you shall receive

St. Gaspar

"Therefore, I prefer to pray than to speak"³³

³¹ Letter 50, To Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, February-April, 1813

³² Letter to Fr. Antonio Pascucci, January 1827, Letter 1555

³³ from letter 867 to Msgr. Bellisario Cristaldi, April 9, 1824, Resources -8, pg. 34

"The basic consideration is that in aspiring toward God, with whatever inner groaning there may be, in being convinced of the divine presence, the substantial nature of prayer is not lost. What is necessary is that we maintain the intention of serving God without becoming discouraged." ³⁴

Reflection

Through the Season of Lent the readings take us progressively deeper into the disciplines of the Christian life - fasting, almsgiving and prayer. In Tuesday's gospel, Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Today he encourages them to ask, to seek, to knock, whenever they are in need.

The example is in the prayer of Queen Esther some 400 years before Christ. She experienced her people in grave danger and took to prayer and petition. The story of Esther is the sign that God continually watches over his people and never abandons them.

St. Gaspar likewise teaches us an important lesson. In our greatest struggle or sorrow, incapable of great and fancy prayers, a deep sigh may be all we can muster. He insists that this too is prayer, as long as one is certain that God is present. Faith here is learning how to walk in the dark, convinced that God is still present and maintaining our intention to serve him. Faith here is joining our sorrows with the sorrows of the head, of living with Jesus in the garden or under arrest, or carrying the cross, or suffering the pain of death. A sigh of resignation may not be enough. The sigh, knowing that this is where God lives, and that this is the pain and suffering with which Jesus identifies, is the essential nature of prayer.

Prayer is a way of intimacy with God. The trials and traumas of life often lead us to believe that God has abandoned us. Gaspar invites us during these times to refrain from discouragement with the faith that death has no power over us,

- When have I experienced my greatest need, and how has God provided for me?
- What is the deep desire I have failed to ask of God?
- Who is most in need of our prayers, and what are we willing to do about it?

34 from letter 911 to Mr. Giovanni Francesco Palmucci, June 24, 1824, Resources - 8, pg. 34

Friday of the First Week

The Readings

Ez. 18:21-28 if the wicked renounce sin, they will live
Psalm 130, If you, O Lord, mark iniquities, who can stand?
Matt 5:20-26 Go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and
 present your offering.

St. Gaspar

"Sometimes, even among the best people, certain misunderstandings arise, not for the heart but for the mind, thus allowing the most loveable God to remind us to acknowledge the profound abyss of our lowly status."³⁵

"...since we are not permitted to go or remain without a companion."³⁶

Reflection

God sees room for virtue in the worst sinner. If the sinner turns from evil to do what is right, none of the sin is remembered. Now God is asking us to see the same; to look at those who anger us and to find the same capacity for virtue and grace.

The ancients spoke of the difference between the feeling of anger, the judgmental or insulting remark, and the blind rage. We are not to repress the feeling, but certainly we are not to lash out in violence of word or action. We are to look to ourselves first to see where this passion originates. To St. Gaspar this leads to humility, the recognition that no one is perfect, and enables us to see grace in the offending one.

As we saw Monday, we cannot do the Christian Life alone, and our love for God must take tangible form in love for others. Now we see what to do when inevitable conflict arises. We look to ourselves first, and grow in humility and charity.

- With whom do I need to be more generous?
- What keeps me from forgiveness?
- What will enable me to find room for grace or virtue in another?
- What steps do I need to make in order to slow down my anger and judgment?

³⁵ from letter 927 to Fr. Luigi Moscatelli, July 22, 1824, Resources -8, pg. 14

³⁶ from letter 1015 to Msgr. Francesco Bonomo, December 20, 1824, Resources 8, pg. 5

Saturday of the First Week

The Readings

Dt. 26: 16-19 Observe God's Law with heart and soul
Psalm 119, Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord.
Matt 5:43-48 ...but I say: love your enemies.

St. Gaspar

Since the beginning and the progress of a devout life depend entirely upon interior mortification, let this be something that is always thoroughly dear to you. Be firm in overcoming the obstacles that are met along the road to perfection; be big-hearted in the execution of your desires, keeping them in conformity to the divine good pleasure, and, do not be fearful of any opposition that you may encounter that would try to discourage you. These are general principles for everyone and they become better understood with the practice of them. Remember that we are in service to a Lord who is sweetness itself and one who wants our love. Therefore, let Jesus reside in our hearts, the thought of eternity in our minds, the world kept under our feet, and, in this way gain merits.³⁷

"May God always be blessed in times of prosperity as well as adversity, and let us try to live ever in conformity with his holy will."³⁸

"The bravery of a soldier and his skill are recognized in the battle that he fights; the sturdiness of a plant is made evident as soon as it resists the violent impact of the wind; the quality of a metal is proved by the repeated blows of a hammer. Therefore, be courageous: our most loving Father is totally intent on having us grow in evangelical perfection, in detachment from created things, in total abandonment to his most holy desires."³⁹

Reflection

Jesus sits before us as a teacher. In the Sermon on the Mount we listen to his wisdom and to his instruction. Life is ours if we keep his commands. And one of his commands is that we love our enemies. How difficult it is to hear! The world is filled with violence, and we may fear for our safety and security. But if we are to follow Jesus we are commanded to have love and compassion for enemies. They may remain enemies, yet we are to be revealed as members of Christ's body in how we remain faithful in the struggle.

Entering more deeply into the disciplines of Lent we set out on the road to perfection. This perfection is an ever-growing likeness with the ways of God. One who is begotten of God is known by compassion, love, and forgiveness, not by anger and bitterness toward enemies.

This perfection is not easily attained. St. Gaspar teaches that the disciples are moved by the chisel of the struggles and trials of the world. It is there that we are revealed as children of God.

Any relationship goes through this type of purification as we detach ourselves from prior ways and observe the ways and actions with and for the beloved. So too the relationship with God teaches us to observe his ways and learn to do his will.

³⁷ from Letter 94, April 15, 1814, to Countess Bianca Ginnasi

³⁸ from letter 11 to Maria Tamini, November 11, 1810, Resources 4, pg. 3

³⁹ from letter 51 to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, February-April, 1813, Resources 4, pg.3-4

- What actions in my daily life reveal me as a child of God?
- What actions reveal me as a child of the world?
- What is God teaching me this Lent?

Second Sunday of Lent (A)

The Readings

Gen 12:1-4a The Promises made to Abraham
 2 Tim 1:8b-10 Death is robbed of its power
 Matt 17:1-9 Transfiguration: This is my Son, the chosen one, listen to him.

St. Gaspar

"Our most loving God calls us to the mystical mountain. Moses of old received the supreme commandments of the Most High from the midst of the burning thorn bush so that he might later carry them out faithfully. In like manner should we upon the mountain of perfection heed the voice of our most affectionate Father so that we might afterwards be able to communicate his divine will to others? How should we not humble ourselves before God when contemplating our sublime calling and the responsibilities which we have in virtue of our sacred duties, our talents granted by the Lord, and the heavenly treasures entrusted to our care?"⁴⁰

"Courage for paradise is very near; every day we draw closer to that blessed homeland."⁴¹

"Let us prepare ourselves for gaining the youthfulness of spirit spoken of by the prophet. Youth represents robustness. So may our interior life be robust, etc."⁴²

Reflection

I love mountains. You can see forever. On the mountain the struggle needed to arrive there is forgotten. Mountains are important in Matthew's gospel. Many important things happened on high places: the beatitudes, the healing, the transfiguration, the mount of Calvary, and the Mountain of the great Commission and the Ascension. So it was on a mountain, a place on earth, but a place pointing to heaven, that he was revealed as the one who carries God's Word, as one who is a light in darkness, as one who carries God's healing, as one who is beloved son, and as one who is victorious through suffering. In the Transfiguration we are given a glimpse of what is true, what is real, and what we will become. We will want to stay there like Peter, but St. Gaspar teaches us, like Jesus teaches, that we must return to the valley to continue the journey, to share the fruits of our vision, and to listen the one who goes before us through the suffering to the victory of eternal life.

- What is the vision I carry through this valley?
- How have I made time for listening?
- What must I do to identify with the beloved?

⁴⁰ from Second Circular Letter, 1827

⁴¹ from letter 127 to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, October 11, 1815, Resources 4, pg. 14

⁴² from letter 358 to Fr. Adriano M. Tarulli, October 30, 1820, Resources 4, pg 14

Second Sunday of Lent (B)

The Readings

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a,10-13, 15-18

Psalms 116

Romans 8: 31b-34

Mark 9:2-10

The Sacrifice of Abraham

I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living

If God is for us, who can be against?

This is my Beloved Son, Listen to him. (Transfiguration)

St. Gaspar del Bufalo

Therefore, let us willingly retire to a place of solitude; let us listen to the voice of God as he directs us in a special way during these days. *For your voice is sweet. (Song 2:14)* Let this be an enlightenment of our minds and a sanctification of our hearts so that we may become indefatigable workers in the eyes of God.⁴³

For you the hour of the great apostolate has not yet come, but the time to acquire the necessary dispositions is your work now. Now you must learn how to handle the spiritual weapons: *This God ... who trains my hand for battle. (Cf. 2 Sm 22:35, Ps 17 (18):35)* Now the necessary provisions for the struggle are being made. Now the ambush of the enemy is exposed and the plan laid for his defeat. Is not this a great apostolic groundwork? Dearly beloved, take these words to heart. Listen with docility, as did Samuel in the temple, to the promptings of grace, and guard it carefully.⁴⁴

Through the Cross we enjoy the abundance of those mystic waters, which symbolize the graces issuing from the merits of the divine Blood so as to be able to promote purity of life in ourselves and in our neighbor. Let us, then, listen to the convincing voice of the Savior who shows us his sufferings as an incentive to be zealous for souls, for they have been purchased at an inestimable price. *You have been bought at a great price. (1 Cor 6:20)*⁴⁵

Reflection

A married person often marries what they consider the ideal spouse. Much of what is entailed here is the imagination, the hopes and dreams, and often we must go beyond the ideal to the actual person. To receive another person as they are and not as I want them to be is the greatest act of respect.

The disciples had to learn to listen. They wanted to operate like kings, based in power, success and prestige. What they hoped for in Jesus was not what they got, and it took many challenges before they were to receive him as he is. Jesus was not succeeding as they hoped. There was opposition from the Pharisees, and now he was predicting his passion and death. Peter had opposed that but Jesus put him in his place. Their view of Jesus must be transfigured.

Now on the mountain they see him as he is. They hear the voice that Jesus had heard at his baptism, "This is my beloved Son, Listen to him."

⁴³ From "Method for the Spiritual Exercises"

⁴⁴ Third Circular Letter, 1829

⁴⁵ Eighth Circular Letter, 1834

Did they hear? Not really! He asked them to be quiet until he rose from the dead. Rather than paying attention to who he is, they discuss among themselves what rising from the dead might mean. Our encounter with Jesus is not supposed to lead us into endless theological discussion.

Are we really ready to accept a messiah who comes to life through suffering rather than conquering through power? When we listen to Jesus we must receive him as he is, not as we hope, want or expect. God's word breaks in upon us not for our comfort, but to call us to conversion. Peter wanted to make three tents as if we were dealing with three equals. He and we still have much to learn

The discipline of prayer this Lent means listening to Jesus with new ears and seeing with new eyes, receiving him as he is.

- What do I hope, want or expect from Jesus?
- What about Jesus do I not want to listen to?
- Where might he be calling me to conversion?
- Where has suffering led to new life?

Second Sunday of Lent (C)

Readings

Gen 15:5-12, 17-18

The Covenant with Abraham

Psalms 27

The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Phil 3:17-4:1

Our citizenship is in heaven

Luke 9:28b-36

This is my chosen Son; listen to him. The Transfiguration

St. Gaspar⁴⁶

One glance at the divine Blood and we are aroused to toil with untiring zeal and to work in the true spirit of God: for, *Everyone moved by the Spirit is a son of God.*⁴⁷ We shall work but we shall be so well established in virtue that in our labors no demand from the flesh and blood nor any other desire will ever be heeded: *It was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you.*⁴⁸ We shall work, indeed, but with joy and holy delight in God. We know that even though we now encourage each other to labor with joy and elation, later we shall bear the Cross of Jesus Christ in victory and triumph unto a most blissful eternity. Since this Cross is the golden ladder to heaven, we shall never cease to exclaim: *In all our trouble, my joy is overflowing.*⁴⁹

Reflection

It was a brief shining moment, he is revealed, and revealed as he is. It is an exceptional moment. The selection of readings today relates the transfiguration to the mystical encounter that was the covenant with Abraham. As the face of Moses became radiant in the presence of

⁴⁶ Third Circular Letter, 1829

⁴⁷ Rom 8:14

⁴⁸ Mt 16:17

⁴⁹ 2 Cor 7:4

God (Ex 34:29), St. Gaspar invites us to be aroused by one glance at this tremendous mystery.

Even in the midst of this revelation we are invited to contemplate the cross. Both Moses and Elijah have experiences of rejection and they were conversing with Jesus about his “exodus” that he was to accomplish in Jerusalem. The dark clouds may cover us too, and we may become fearful as the first disciples, but in the midst of our trials we discover Jesus and his cross and our participation in this mystery.

Peter and the disciples are encouraging to us. Their sleep and their incomprehension encourage us to open our eyes to the mysteries in which we live. Peter does not want to see the revelation end, but with them we descend the mountain contemplating the memory of his presence. The bright shining moments are to enable us to endure the struggle with confidence and with faith. The celebration of this feast reveals again his divine presence, and reveals what we are called to be. Each Eucharist is to be a glimpse of this heavenly feast and to encourage us who are sent into the world having heard the voice of the Lord and strengthened with his presence.

- Describe how I am becoming more open to listening to God’s voice.
- When was the moment in my life when the reality of God’s presence became clear? How did I respond?
- Where do I find strength and encouragement in struggles and difficulties?

Monday of the Second Week of Lent

The Readings

Dan 9:4b-10	We have sinned
Psalms 79	Lord, do not deal with us according to our sins.
Luke 6:36-38	Be compassionate, do not judge and you will not be judged; the generosity of God.

St. Gaspar

"I shall not be lacking in promptness to do this marvelous deed for which I am an unworthy instrument. Certainly it is very necessary that the bases for this mystical edifice be firmly established through prayer and industrious charity."⁵⁰

"And of, what a great consolation it is to reflect that no matter where we may be, we are with God. This is the same thing as saying that we are with the one and only Good, with the object of our delights, with the only one who can satisfy our heart's desires."⁵¹

"With God's help, we can do all things since God is total goodness and love toward us. Hence, be confident and courageous."⁵²

⁵⁰ from letter 1616, to Fr. Giovanni Mimmi, April 16, 1827, Resources-11, pg. 23

⁵¹ from letter 43 to Msgr. Annibale Ginnasi, March, 1813, Resources-4 pg. 17

⁵² from letter 74 to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, August, 1813, Resources 4, pg. 19

I understand what you say about Fr. Vittorio. His behavior is a worry for us. He has received nothing but love from the Society, and God does not have need of his influence for the government or the spread of the Society. I forgive his intentions, but you know very well what writers of moral theology and asceticism say about the discrediting of an Institute. Yes, you can be sure, it is truly an eccentricity. If you think it is a good idea, write to him.⁵³

Let us be consoled that God is being glorified during these miserable times of ours, during which an increase in prayer is needed so that the radical reform that all of us are hoping for will become a reality. Let us forgive our neighbor as best we can and with an industrious charity let us carry out the works of the Lord. Not all have the same gifts. Training, also, is something very influential on others. So, one will support the other and thus we will maintain a balance in the equilibrium. May the Divine Blood be for us the fountain of ample blessings and you, through this devotion, have reason to be consoled.⁵⁴

Reflection

Today is a day to focus on two things: Covenant and the forgiveness of sins. Our God is a compassionate God who keeps his merciful covenant, showering his people with the fullness of his divine gifts, good measure and overflowing. Jesus directs his disciples to be merciful as God is merciful. The Lord does not deal with us according to our sins. So then, we too, if we are his followers, are directed to let go of judgment and approach our neighbor with mercy and forgiveness. God is merciful, so we are merciful.

St. Gaspar was a model of forgiveness. In dozens of his letters you find him in difficult situations, but early on you hear him say “I forgive all.”

In the process leading up to his canonization his niece was heard to say:

He was, of course, very careful not to bring any sort of harm to his neighbor, neither in his physical person nor to his honor nor to his property. He was most eager to forgive defects in others and when it was a question of something minor, he would not at all make a fuss about it, acknowledging the fact that no person is without faults.⁵⁵

We are invited and challenged to put on the ways of God, to enter the covenant he has established through his extravagant generosity and the blood of his Son, to take hold of his mercy and show his compassion to the world. St. Gaspar saw this as only possible when we are aware that we possess our greatest desire. When we know the unending and extravagant generosity of God, then we are able to share it with others. If we feel judged and held bound by our sins, then we do not have the capacity to show mercy ourselves. But forgiven much, we are able to show mercy as well, and this "industrious charity" is the basis of building the reign of God.

- What behavior of mine is most like God's?
- Where in my life do I need God's mercy?
- How would I describe the Love of God?

53 Letter 1773, July 12, 1828, Fr. Pietro Butti

54 Letter 1465, July 14, 1826, Luigi Fuschi

55 Deposition of Luigia del Bufalo at the Roman Apostolic Process

these disciplines can be misused and bring other gratification as well, the affirmation and praise of others. All the titles used in our world and in our church, Teacher, Doctor, Father, Sister, Brother, Deacon, etc. are titles of service for others. Yet we can be tempted to depend on the gratification the title earns us, or we can be called to serve as the title of respect demands. St. Gaspar calls us to self examination as well, that we, who have cherished the Word of God, may not forget the call the Word give us. The Word calls us to humility as well. Humility is the simple truth that the One who created us is simply beyond us, that we are his children. When we act like we are in charge, or in control, we sin against the truth. Only servants know the truth.

- How do I behave because of who I am or what I have done?
- What are some of the ways I can be a better servant?
- When was the last time I desired to be the greatest?

Wednesday of the Second week of Lent

The Readings

Jer. 18:1-20 The plot against Jeremiah, his lament
Ps. 30 Save me, O Lord, in your kindness.
Matt 20:17-28 Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?

St. Gaspar

"Enter on this holy retreat, therefore, holding in your hands the book of the crucifix." ⁶⁴

"Do you know that even good souls must bear crosses? That is how God disposes things. The heart is straightforward, but the mind is dimmed. Recall the resolutions made during our retreat and now put them into execution. Bear your cross with equilibrium and, through suffering, prepare yourself to suffer even more, until 'proved through all' you will be a mystical stone fit for the celestial Jerusalem."⁶⁵

Would that he grant us to drink only a drop from that Chalice of bitterness which he drank to the dregs for us, to the most loving Father. St. Francis de Sales used to say that Paradise is a mountain (I will never tire of repeating it to all) which one scales more easily with broken legs than with whole ones. Happily *per multas tribulationes*⁶⁶, let us hope to reach the goal of our desires.⁶⁷

Reflection

Doing what Jesus does sometimes leads to misunderstanding and persecutions. Professing respect for the dignity of life from conception to natural death can lead to people considering you "intolerant." Professing faith in Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life can be misunderstood as violence against other faiths, and yet we take up the cross, we drink his cup,

⁶⁴ from the Second Circular Letter, 1827

⁶⁵ from letter 1598, to Fr. Raffaele Rosati, March 25, 18__, Resources 11, pg. 11-12

⁶⁶ through many tribulations

⁶⁷ Letter 13, January 18, 1811, to Fr. Antonio Santelli

seeking only to serve him. And, if we are misunderstood or criticized, we have great examples in Jeremiah and in Jesus. We have a great example too in St. Gaspar who professed his faith and was sent to prison for it.

Jesus came to serve and to give his life. This is to be the way for those who follow him. This, as St. Gaspar teaches, is the only book one needs to read. "See how they love each other; See how they serve each other." This is what is to be spoken of us.

James and John had a normal mother. She would not learn unless she put forth her desires. We learn too, in our desire for life and glory, that it comes only from serving God and others.

- What have I learned from the cross?
- What desires of mine need to be transformed?
- What actions among us "prove" our discipleship?

Thursday of the Second week of Lent

The Readings

Jer 17:5-10 The Lord searches the heart, Blest are they who trust in the Lord
Psalm 1, Blessed are they who hope in the Lord
Luke 16: 19-31 The Rich Man and Lazarus

St. Gaspar

"In the same way does the Lord act when he wishes to demonstrate his mercy, and he will do so also for us, Oh souls redeemed at the price of the living Blood; so do not be doubtful. Are difficulties encountered while in service to God? Then God will open a way through that sea; he will take away those obstacles. Keep going ahead, you will have no impediments. You have behind you all the demons of hell pursuing you, very vehement temptations that threaten you with destruction. But, 'Do not be afraid.' God will arrest their fury and will lead you to a place of rest. In your defense, your holy advocates watch over you; your guardian angel is there to assist you; Mary most Holy spreads her mantle of protection over you; Jesus crucified extends his arms to you. He waits to welcome you in the sacrament of Penance; he comes to meet you, nourish you and strengthen you in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Already he holds out to you the indestructible crown of glory that will make you eternally happy. What more could you wish for? In your difficulties, so de Sales asserts, repeat frequently to yourself that this is the road that leads to heaven. I see the port and I am certain that the storms will not be able to stop me from reaching it. The greater your misery, so much greater will be the triumph of divine goodness."⁶⁸

Reflection

Jeremiah is very clear. If we trust in what we can see, it will fail us, disappoint us, and even curse us, because we trusted in something useless. And blessed is the one who trusts God! Blessed is the one who trusts in him who lasts forever, who will never fail or disappoint. But Jeremiah continues, the human heart is fickle and foolish, even perverse in its longing for

⁶⁸ from letter 62 to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, April 29, 1813, Resources - 4, pg. 18-19

what fails to satisfy. Jesus continues the teaching. Riches are not a sign of God's blessing. They are a sign of our greater responsibility, especially to the poor. St. Gaspar concludes that we do not come to Jesus, or to religious life, for our own desires or opinion, but to nourish the real life of the soul and seek the Glory of God. His passage above written from prison, is a great comfort to the fickle and perverse human heart that struggles with attachments to temporal things. God will open a way through that choppy sea and provide the protection needed if one but hopes in the Lord.

- On what do I have my heart set?
- What have I done for Lazarus this week?
- Describe your "road that leads to heaven."
- Look back to Thursday after Ash Wednesday and reflect on how or if the Lord has changed your mind.

Friday of the Second Week of Lent

The Readings

Gen 37: 3-4,12-13, 17-28 Joseph's Brothers sell him into slavery into Egypt
Ps 105 Remember the marvels the Lord has done
Matt 21:33-43, 45-46 Parable of the Vineyard, The stone rejected by the builders that became the cornerstone.

St. Gaspar

writing from prison:

"It is true -- they are thorns, but, they are thorns that sustain the mystical rose. They are bitter drink, it is true -- but a bitter drink that helps anyone to a change of life in the spirit and assists us to be distrustful of self and confident in the divine goodness, which is the sum total of our sanctification. To this mystical winter, there usually follows a flowering spring; to this most beautiful mystical night, there usually follows a most serene day; to this mystical storm, there follows a most consoling calm. In any event, it is always proper to remain in conformity to the sovereign dispositions and to recommend oneself to the Lord to keep us always faithful to him. Amen." ⁶⁹

Reflection

Joseph shared his dreams with his brothers. His brothers rejected that dream and sold him into slavery. In God's mysterious designs, over a period of years, this tragedy was a place for God to show his marvels as Joseph became a source of nourishment for Egypt and for his brothers.

The Landowner in Jesus' parable had a dream of a rich and bountiful harvest. The tenants rejected that dream and resorted to violence. In God's marvelous design, the stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.

St. Gaspar reminds us that any dream worth dreaming is worth remaining faithful to,

69 from Letter No. 51 to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, February-April, 1813) SP4, pg.26

even if denied and rejected. We trust in the marvels God can do. The darkness of Joseph's slavery and the winter of the murder of the landowner's son all become the light and spring of nourishment and life.

- What dreams of mine have been rejected?
- In what ways do I tend to trust in my own strength only?
- How do I show that I am willing to endure the winters in my life, hopeful of spring?

Saturday of the Second Week

The Readings

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20	The Lord Pastures his people in mercy
Psalms 103,	The Lord is kind and merciful
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32	The Prodigal Son

St. Gaspar

"Oh soul, redeemed by the most precious Blood of Jesus the redeemer, at this point, lift up your thoughts and realize that this ineffable benefit and august mystery, together with incarnation of the Son of God, was a flaming outburst of love: "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave"⁷⁰ His submission to so many pains and trials was a flaming outburst of love to leave himself of Calvary. It was a flaming outburst of love to leave himself entirely in the Eucharistic banquet. It was a flaming outburst of love for him to find his delight in us miserable creatures: "rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race,"⁷¹ and that burning wish of his for our eternal salvation in the beloved homeland of heaven. Oh soul, plunge yourself deeply into these moving thoughts and you cannot help but repeat with the Apostle: "The love of Christ impels us!"⁷² It is not so much what Jesus suffered as it is the love that he demonstrated in his suffering for us that obliges us and even forces us to love him in return."⁷³

Ultimately, let us be united evermore with God the giver of every good gift. May his grace and his love inflame us and raise us to the most intimate love for him. Let us love him without measure, let us love him without reserve, let us love him without failing, since he is in essence love. I leave you now in the divine heart! Oh what a sweet abode.⁷⁴

Reflection

This is a father who delights in showing mercy. Twice he leaves his house to bestow extravagant love to his children. If he had stayed home he would have had one dead child and one ungrateful servant. Instead he wanted two sons. So he does the unexpected. He sees a sinful child still far off and he is filled with compassion. Not waiting for the child to come to him, he goes first, to protect him from the judgment of those who condemn sinners, and second

⁷⁰ Phil 2:7

⁷¹ Prov. 8:31

⁷² 2 Cor 5:14

⁷³ from Letter No. 57 to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, April 14, 1813, Resource 4, pg. 22

⁷⁴ to Mother Maria Nazzarena De Castris, May 18, 1826, Letter 1414, Resources 11, pg. 3

to bestow gifts of mercy, freedom and honor. For the second son he leaves the celebration to make clear that the invitation is to sinners, to those who because of pride remain distant, and to those on the outside who do not feel welcome at the feast. It is Jesus who has left the house of heaven, and is outside with us, inviting us and all sinners to the life he came to give. And to make clear that there is nothing that will separate us from the love of God.

St. Gaspar wants us to experience this immeasurable generosity of God. He adds words like "ineffable benefit," "august mystery," and "flaming outburst" to describe the inexpressible Love of God. He wants us to experience the depths of this love that we might learn to love without measure.

- How can I be less judgmental of other sinners?
- What must I do accept this extravagant love for myself, too?
- What fires me up?

Third Sunday of Lent (A)

The Readings

Ex 17:3-7

Moses strikes the rock, and water flows from it for the people.

Psalms 95,

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8,

The love of God has been poured into our hearts.

John 4: 5-42,

Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well: the water that I shall give will turn into a spring, welling up to eternal life.

St. Gaspar

We who yearn to be united forever in Heaven, as we are here on this miserable earth, let us never cease to meditate regularly on the eternal truths, and full of confidence and trust in the most merciful God let us sigh longingly to be quickly possessors of eternal happiness. "Thy kingdom come!" But it is not enough that we merely have a desire for virtue and perfection in the conduct of our spirit; it is necessary that we have a hunger and thirst for it (so that we can say with the Prophet: "As the deer longs for running streams, so my soul longs for you, my God."⁷⁵ and arrive thereby to the goal of our desires with all the merits possible.⁷⁶

The white dove is timid and watchful. When the hawk pursues It, it plunges into water. Similarly, the truly contrite soul during this holy retreat will adopt for itself that new manner of life in which alertness and watchfulness are maintained. At the same time, the fear of God will make it ready to flee every occasion of relapsing into sin. It will imitate Noah's white dove, and in the mystical ark of the divine Heart, it will seek that serene mansion which contains a foretaste of Paradise from within. In that way, when the devil, like the cruel hawk, lies in wait, it will plunge itself courageously into the waters that flow from the fountain opened by the wounds of Christ. By coming in contact with those mystical waters of eternal life, it again will find comfort and peace, while gathering new strength to conquer and rout the common tempter.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Psalm 42

⁷⁶ Letter 41, end of February 1813, Msgr. Annibale Ginnasi, Imola

⁷⁷ Seventh Circular Letter, 1833

Whoever looks forward to becoming virtuous, is disgusted with whatever leads away from God. He thirsts only after God, for in the unitive way he will be continually filled with desire and ever thirsting for God himself. Just as doves are regularly seen along “a pool of water”⁷⁸ so let our life's sojourn be near the fountains of eternal life. As the hart follows the course of his favorite brook to quench his thirst, so too let us thirst after our dear Lord. “As the deer longs for running streams, so my soul longs for you, my God.”⁷⁹ It is the Lord who says to us: “Oh, come to the water all you who are thirsty”.⁸⁰ Whoever drinks of these waters “will be thirsty again”⁸¹ On the other hand, the dove also spreads out its wings in flight, “the wings of the dove”⁸² So we too, by advancing in virtue and the desire for perfection, should seek to fly to the throne of the Lord.⁸³

Reflection

The Third, Fourth and Fifth Sundays of Lent have from ancient times used passages from John's Gospel to prepare us for the wonders of Easter where the catechumens are immersed in the waters of baptism and brought to the fullness of life in Christ. On this Third Sunday, from ancient times, we have celebrated the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the Fourth Chapter of John's Gospel. This unnamed woman represents all her people who have left other gods and slowly, but surely, comes to a relationship with Jesus as Savior of the world.

This is somewhat akin to a courtship. As any couple enters into conversation, and slowly increases their knowledge and experience of one another, this woman progresses from understanding Jesus as an unknown Jew, to knowing him as better than Jacob, as a prophet and finally as Savior. In the Hebrew Scriptures wells were often meeting places where significant relationships were begun. In Genesis a well was the place for Isaac and Rebecca to meet, and their son Jacob met his wife Rachel at a well. In the Book of Exodus Moses and his wife Zipporah met at a well. At this well in the Gospel of John we learn what it means to worship God, not on this mountain or that mountain, but in Spirit and in Truth. At this well he awakens our thirst for the Living water that wells up to eternal life.

For St. Gaspar this thirst for truth was an essential part of life. As doves remain close to water, so the soul is to develop a thirst for God. Desire was not enough. Gaspar wants us to hunger and thirst for “waters that flow from the fountain opened by the wounds of Christ.” This intimate relationship with God will bring us the comfort and peace, the virtue and perfection we so desire.

- What will increase our Thirst for God?
- How has my relationship with Christ increased this past year?
- How have I become too satisfied with the life I lead?

78 Sg 5:12

79 Ps 42:2

80 Is 55:1

81 Jn 4:13

82 Ps 68:14

83 The Seventh Circular Letter, 1833

Third Sunday of Lent (B)

The Readings

Exodus 20: 1-17	The Law was given through Moses
Psalms 19:8,9,10,11	Lord, You have the words of everlasting life
I Cor 1:22-25	We proclaim Christ crucified
John 2:13-25	Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.

St. Gaspar

With pleasure did I receive your most esteemed letter and I note in it the ever admirable working of the grace of God in your heart which is a temple of the Lord. It cannot be denied that Almighty God loves to beautify more and more that mystical temple to the glory of his name. *You are the temple of God* The entranceway of that temple is made of a mystical precious metal, and the devil is prohibited from making any access therein.

That entranceway is so well-constructed that it will not be shaken by the attacks of the enemy. The sides are solid walls made of very durable bricks of different colors and perfectly shaped. It is a signification of an aggregate of virtues which maintain the soul dedicated in its service to God. The ceiling of this temple is entirely gilded with gold; and this symbolizes the very precious work of the holy love of God, as well as its varied operations. In this temple, there are windows which admit the holy light of celestial inspirations, and because of this, that peace is enjoyed which forms in the soul a foretaste of paradise. Therein does God find his delight. The work that has gone into the construction of this temple, its adornments, makes it similar to a mystical wine-cellar where, in silence and active contemplation, one builds heavenward.⁸⁴

Reflection

Jesus was a pious Jew who observed the law and the temple. He also broke with the law and the temple because he is beyond them. So we listen to not just what he says. We listen to who he is. The ancient prophet spoke of a time when the Lord would come to his temple and there would be no need of sacrifices or money changers. Jesus is saying that the time is now. The relationship has changed. It is not simply that the Lord has come to his temple. He IS the temple. If he is the temple the relationship with God is entirely remade, and human nature is raised to an incredible destiny. God has visited his people and is present to them in a whole new way.

So are we stuck in the old ways? Are we still trying to earn heaven? Can we not be open enough to accept this gift? It is time for us to develop a new image of our self as a temple of the Lord.

- How might I consider my self as a dwelling place for God?
- What must I let go of in order to receive his gift?
- How has lent given me a new vision of myself?

⁸⁴ Letter 2048, to Mother Maria Nazzarena De Castris, June 12, 1830

Third Sunday of Lent (C)

The Readings

Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15

Moses and the burning bush

Ps 103

The Lord is kind and merciful.

I Cor 10:1-6, 10-12

They drank from a spiritual rock, and the rock was Christ.

Lk 13:1-9

If you do not repent, you will perish.

St. Gaspar

"Oh how few people know how to suffer! A bundle of wood tidily arranged and carefully piled together is carried with ease, while that same amount of wood, arranged haphazardly or loosely tied together here and there, is carried with difficulty, and is pulled along with twice as much pain. The same can be said about Crosses etc."

"A man who has no Crosses - Oh! In how many dangers does he not find himself! What does God do? He permits calumnies etc. etc. The humbled man looks more deeply into his own nothingness etc. In the delight of his courtly life, David sinned etc. But later, with God permitting, Absalom rebelled against him and David then exclaimed: *It was good for me to be humbled,...*⁸⁵

"Tell me, oh Christians: does the press harm the grapes? Not really. Even though it crushes the grapes, it nevertheless dissolves them into a very sweet wine. Tell me: does the file harm the metal? Not really. Even though it roughly scrapes it, it makes it shinier. Does fire harm gold? Not really, for even though it burns it and attacks it, it nevertheless cleanses it etc. Look there at that wood destined for the fire; an artist sees it, he is attracted to it, and with his own instruments, he shapes it and converts it into a work that is worthy of admiration. So, if I were to question the wood to see whether it would have been happier etc....⁸⁶

Reflection

Politics can be pretty passionate, and often unreasonable. Often for peaceful purposes we do not discuss politics with people who may disagree with us. You can almost imagine the tone of voice of the partisans who confront Jesus in today's gospel: "Did you hear? Wasn't that awful? What a tragedy! What are you going to do?"

Often we hold misconceptions of God as a passionate partisan for whatever cause we hold, as if God is only a God of justice, righteousness and vengeance.

Jesus does not ask them to submit to Pilate. He does not require them to acquiesce to Roman oppression. But he has a deep concern for the people in front of him who will destroy themselves and all around them if they do not look first at their own heart. Evil forces are at work in them, too, Pilate, or no Pilate, they must change or be destroyed by these forces. Often those who fight for a just cause will assume that the struggle for justice will make them righteous. It is not possible to be righteous by pointing out the wrongs in others. For Jesus, that would be avoiding the real issue, the soil of each heart that longs for growth.

⁸⁵ Psalm 119:71

⁸⁶ From St Gaspar, Scritti, Reform 5., Volume 7, No. 13, p. 34-36

The God that is revealed here is not a General that takes sides and established justice through the exercise of power. No, God is revealed as a patient gardener looking for fruit. He is willing to do some hoeing and weeding, willing to provide the nutrients, willing to be patient for the growth. St. Gaspar encourages us to let God till the soil and crush the grapes, and to see in our struggle and crosses the true path to justice and peace.

- What are we doing to allow the Lord to till the soil of our hearts?
- What changes to we need to make in our demands of God?
- What is the growth we are looking forward to in our own life?

Monday of the Third Week

The Readings

2 Kings 5:1-15

Cure of Naaman, leper

Ps 42

Athirst is my soul for the living God. When shall I go and behold the face of God.

Luke 4:24-30

No prophet accepted in his hometown. ...many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, none of them cleansed except Naaman, the Syrian.

St. Gaspar

"Assiduous prayers, etc. and courage through the merits of the divine Blood. The works of God are the fruit of tears and of suffering. In short, let us serve God and even though troubled by things, let us glory in the crosses through which we will attain salvation.⁸⁷

"So prayers. I realize that perfection is not attained in a single day, but if the sick person pays no attention to the remedies for a cure, nor does he bother to listen to the advice that respectfully I keep giving him, what are we to do?⁸⁸

Reflection

Naaman had expectations of the healing powers of the prophet Elijah. He wanted a display of power, but his expectations were not fulfilled. The people of Jesus time had expectations of the kind of Messiah they were waiting for, but Jesus took the part of the poor and the foreigner, and so their expectations were not met.

Often in our relationships with other people we approach them with our expectations rather than meeting them as they are. Married people sometimes fall in love with their ideal spouse and their hopes and dreams before discovering the person as they truly are. Religious men and women do the same thing with their communities.

Experience then sometimes provides a disappointment for us, when people do not meet our expectations. On hearing Jesus as he is, they rose up and attempted to kill him. We are challenged too to see if we approach Jesus as he is in himself, or if we have developed expectations that govern this relationship. St. Gaspar calls us to a listening posture, and even if the encounter provides an experience of the cross we are to glory in that cross as a way to salvation.

⁸⁷ letter 1447, to Msgr Bellisario Cristaldi, May 16, 1826, Resources 11, pg 10

⁸⁸ letter 1521, to Fr. Pietro Butti, October 5, 1826, Resources 11, pg. 5

- How can I be more open to other people as they are?
- Where might I allow my friends or spouse to be different from my expectations.
- What freedom must I have to allow my friends to change?

Tuesday of the Third Week

The Readings

Dan 3, The prayer of Azariah. With contrite heart and humble spirit may we be accepted.

Ps. 25, Remember your mercies, O Lord.

Matt 18:21-35 Forgiveness not seven times, but seventy seven times. The parable of the unforgiving servant.

St. Gaspar

What sort of life are we to follow? Not the walls that enclose us, nor solely the Rule which guides us, will make us saints. Holiness is the result of mortifying the passions and of prayerful union with God. Indulging in self-love, lacking docility and respect, failing to love our Society deeply, or maintaining harmony among yourselves --- all of this constitutes opposition to the spiritual life. May heaven protect you against such diabolical evils.⁸⁹

Reflection

Each day we pray the Lord's Prayer and we ask God to forgive us as we forgive. We have already seen that there are no limits to God's extravagant generosity. "In Christ and in his blood we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God's favor for us." (Eph 1:7) We who have been forgiven much by the Lord are now being asked to make this same generosity visible still by offering forgiveness without limits, to live without limits. Jesus is not interested in us becoming bitter, angry, vengeful people because of wrongs done to us. He wants us to be bearers of this generous forgiveness so that we may become more like him. When he asks us to forgive others he is asking us to act in our own best self interest. Lacking the docility and respect that enables us to love and forgive is for St. Gaspar a great tragedy.

- Whom do I need to forgive?
- Do I need to forgive myself?
- How readily to I carry a grudge?

89 from the Second Circular Letter, 1827

Wednesday of the Third week

The Readings

Dt. 4:1,5-9 Observe the law, tell them to your children, and your children's children.
Psalm 147, Praise the Lord, Jerusalem
Matt 5:17-19 I have come, not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.

St. Gaspar

"Oh how our souls find comfort in the exercise of virtue and of what great undertaking is the heart capable that is dedicated solely to God! . . ." ⁹⁰

"Not the walls that surround us nor the men with whom we live, but rather the victory over our own will, even in spiritual things ---that mystic childhood to which Christ calls us --- the desire for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, these alone will make us more perfect. They form, as it were, the framework of the holiness which is lacking in us and which we must absolutely seek to attain as the consequence of this retreat. "So get rid of all the old yeast" ⁹¹
"Let your armor be the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹²" ⁹³

Reflection

It is not the fact that I go to church that makes me holy. It is not because we have these laws and commands of Jesus that makes us perfect. St Gaspar indicates that the inner law of love, the desire for God's will rather than my own is the framework or law that makes us whole. It is not the law itself, but the life as God desires or intends. That is what Jesus came to fulfill. We arrive at God's desire not by disregarding laws, but by seeking to fulfill their deepest intent as Jesus did. The least command, the obscure parts of God's will, the mundane parts of each day, all have the capacity to reveal God's way. We may get the impression that Jesus disregarded the laws of his day, but he did not approach them with a destructive intent, but with a desire to see God's desire fulfilled. I go to church on Sunday, not because I have to, but because I desire to be with God and with his people, the body of Christ.

- What laws of my family do I have difficulty appreciating?
- Are there laws of my city and state that do not fulfill God's desire? What are they and how do I respond to them?
- What laws of my church have I rejected, or have difficulty accepting?

⁹⁰ from Letter No. 44 to countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, March 4, 1813, Resources 4, pg. 3

⁹¹ 1 Cor 5:7

⁹² Rm 13:14

⁹³ First Circular Letter, 1826

Thursday of the Third Week

The Readings

Jer 7:23-28 Here is a nation that will not listen to the Lord.
Psalm 95 If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts
Luke 11:14-23 Jesus casts our demons. Some say it is through Beelzubul....

St. Gaspar

"Clinging to one's own opinions and rejecting the advice of others, one can be led to believe that he is in our Society for a purpose other than the one that is understood to be properly its own. But, such is the miserable condition of humans, so that the saying of the saints is only too true: we are all patients in the vast hospitals of the world. Infirmities are cured, however, by the oil of meekness, tenderness, docility; by overcoming self-love through a victorious obedience to our superiors; by supporting each other in mutual, charitable love;⁹⁴ by patiently correcting each other; and finally, by steadfastly bearing with one another."⁹⁵

Reflection

Some people are amazed at what Jesus has done. There are others who refuse to listen. Those in the Gospel who refuse to listen resort to calling Jesus names. In their obstinacy they refuse to answer Jesus' questions. Jesus is no mere legislator. He is the Lord who remains with us, and sustains us. Yet what he asks of us is more rigorous and demanding than the old law. The new law is love and requires us to give everything. When we are converted to the Lord, it means we turn to him, to his ways, and we do not cling to our ways or opinions. To follow Jesus is to embark on a new way. The word "obedience" comes from the word "to listen." We are a people who listen to His living word and follow in his way. For St Gaspar this docility leads to mutual and supporting love, and ultimately to holiness and sainthood.

- What attracted me to Jesus?
- When I turned to Jesus, what did I turn from?
- How do I reveal that I am with Jesus in tangible ways?

Friday of the Third Week

The Readings

Hosea 14: 2-10 "Israel, come back to the Lord your God." The ways of the Lord are straight, the virtuous walk in them, but sinners stumble.
Psalm 81 I am the Lord your God, hear my voice.
Mark 12:28-34 The two great commandments.

St. Gaspar:

Why have you come here? For what purpose are we in the Society? To cooperate with the great designs of divine Providence in the sanctification of ourselves and others; to be united in the bond of charity in order to set up a rampart against the sinfulness of the world, and to

⁹⁴ Cf. Ep 4:2

⁹⁵ First Circular Letter, 1826

quench the thirst of Jesus for souls; to imitate more closely the life of Jesus Christ through detachment from home, parents, worldly comforts and, above all, from ourselves. How all of this contributes to our real benefit and to the glory of God! ...

... In this matter, may our love be very, very special. Let it be generous and outgoing, patient and longsuffering, judicious and vigorous.⁹⁶

"Anyone who loves deeply (final characteristic of divine love), that is to say intensely, so noble an object as God, is never satisfied with his service to him. Nothing upsets him. Nothing frightens him. Nothing restrains him. His heart is like a torrential river that inundates the surrounding countryside; or similar to nourishment in no other thing than in loving the Lord; its thirst never says that it has enough. Just as bees feed on nothing other than honey, so also this person is entirely immersed in the nectar of paradise, in that fountain of sweetness, in that holy, divine love...

"However, Jesus could have achieved that without undergoing so much suffering, I mean, without the total outpouring of his Blood. Jesus wanted to be the model for confessors and martyrs, for apostles and virgins, for hermits and contemplative. Jesus wanted to be the universal master. Jesus wanted to nourish us with his very self; he wanted to die for us! Oh love! Oh love! My dear redeemer, grant that I may live only to love you. Amen." ⁹⁷

Reflection

The ancient Prophet Hosea, The Psalmist, Jesus our Savior, and St Gaspar all ask us to consider why we are here. It is not just an answer to a catechism question. It is a response to a relationship. We are here to learn to love. We are here to learn to love God. For Hosea this love of God is so far reaching it is like a forest putting out its shoots. For St. Gaspar it is like a torrential river that inundates the surrounding countryside. Limits to this love can never be reached. It is never finished. Our whole life consists in this and in this alone. And only this will lead us home. Nothing else will satisfy. So why have we come here? Is this an obligation or an experience of grace? At the table we gather at each day and each Sunday, we gather to learn to give, to serve, to love, to become what we eat in this Eucharistic feast.

- Why am I a Catholic?
- Why do I belong to this parish?
- How can I enter into the heart of this experience of belonging?

96 From the Eleventh Circular Letter

97 from Letter No. 66 to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, May 10, 1813, Resources 4, pg. 23

Saturday of the Third Week

The Readings

Hos 6:1-6

What I want is love, not sacrifice; knowledge of God, not holocausts.

Ps 51

It is mercy I desire, and not sacrifice.

Luke 18:9-14

The Pharisee and the Tax collector. The exalted are humbled, the humble are exalted ⁹⁸

St. Gaspar

In the history of the Church, we find no small number of people who, though laymen, have dedicated themselves through virtue to various offices which, in the judgment of the world appear menial, but in the spirit of religion and the spiritual life, are great and special in the eyes of God. ⁹⁹

However, to guard and to increase the holy gifts granted to us by God, let us not cease, my dearest in Jesus Christ, to ground ourselves in holy humility. This virtue is the basis for every good work, the source of every heavenly blessing and the ladder to heaven. We are worth something only because of the aggregate of God's gifts given to us. ... God wants us to cultivate those gifts that he has given to us. So, continue to advance both in your spiritual life as well as in your acquisition of knowledge, since we, as priests, must be "lux mundi et sal terrae." ... I wish that your days, as well as my own, will be days full of merit, virtue and holiness. May Jesus be our delight, our peace, our comfort. ¹⁰⁰

Reflection

When we focus on ourselves, the temptation may be to compare ourselves with others. As a temptation it would lead us to compare ourselves with those who are, in some superficial ways, less than we are. A certain blindness would prevent us from comparing ourselves with those who, in no less superficial ways, are greater than we are. At any rate, that is all we can compare, external, changeable, temporal qualities.

On the other hand, when we compare ourselves with God, we are left only with humility because there is no comparison. And everything we have and are is a gift from God. Gaspar reminds us that some of these external things may seem to be little in our eyes, but in God's eyes and in view of his gifts they are great. Grounded in humility we are closer to the truth and to what God has done. God has desired to be in relationship with us, and has come to us for this very purpose. Yet too often we get distracted by these external things, and even make them the measure of our spiritual life. We have to ask ourselves if we wish to be great in the eyes of the world, or great friends with God.

- How much time did I spend with my friend today?
- How often do I compare myself with others?
- What internal gifts does God wish to cultivate in me?

⁹⁸ see also Tuesday, week two of Lent

⁹⁹ from Letter 1157 to Fr. Luigi Gonnelli, June 17, 1825, Resources 8, pg 18

¹⁰⁰ from Letter 1206 to Fr. Antonio Loffreda, July 15, 1825, Resources 8, pg. 19

The Fourth Sunday of Lent (A)

The Readings

1 Sam. 16:1, 6-7, 10-13	God does not see as humans see
Psalms 23	The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want
Eph 5:8-14	Be like children of Light
John 9:1-41	The man born blind

St. Gaspar

Oh, how pleased I was to see your handwriting! *Laus Deo in omnibus*.¹⁰¹ In practice I see the good that the union of the Clergy is producing in the questions of principle. The Bishops are becoming more energetic. In the event that there are new trials, *Deo ita permittente*,¹⁰² so that his works might set deeper roots for the uninterrupted exercise of virtue, continue, nevertheless, to support this aspect of the good cause. Strengthening all with prayers, conclude it in such a way that you will obtain whatever may be necessary from the Nunzio (to whom I am going to write). What great blindness of intellect it is not to admit in principle the goodness of something that is such a bulwark against hell. Let us humble ourselves in the presence of the Lord, *et provoluti coram Domino, sine intermissione oremus*.¹⁰³ May you extend your ardent charity also toward the other places covered by the Missions, *ut fructus maneat*.¹⁰⁴ Above all, let us not cease to promote our devotion and that of our St. Xavier.¹⁰⁵

Such is the blindness of so many, for whom we must pray. One day I was pondering the text of the Gospel in which one reads, with regard to Jesus Christ, that *principes et sacerdotes persequabantur eum, turbae autem sequebantur illum*.¹⁰⁶ We pardon everyone's intention, but we do not cease praying.¹⁰⁷

Reflection

This is one of the passages that has traditionally been proclaimed on this Sunday in order to prepare the catechumens for their baptism. The man born blind is a model of all who come to sight; who come to belief in Jesus and proceed to proclaim him to the world. At the beginning the man does not know who Jesus is, but at the end he believes. This belief causes fear on the part of his parents, and persecution on the part of the Pharisees. Belief in Jesus causes one to leave their life behind and to live now in Jesus. This may cause people around to challenge or to oppose us. We are challenged to remain faithful to the vision Jesus gives us in spite of any opposition.

St. Gaspar, in his preaching and ministry, confronted the blindness of those who would fail to see the importance of his teaching and example. This blindness did not delay him. He kept forging ahead, patiently explaining what was important about this spirituality, and praying for those who failed to see.

¹⁰¹ Praise to the Lord in all things.

¹⁰² God thus permitting.

¹⁰³ And prostrate before the Lord, let us pray without interruption.

¹⁰⁴ In order that the fruit remain.

¹⁰⁵ Letter 932, July 28, 1824 to Fr. Nicolo Palma

¹⁰⁶ The leaders and priests persecuted him, but the crowds followed him.

¹⁰⁷ Letter 947, August 20, 1824

- Where do my eyes need to be opened?
- Where do I see the faith challenged by those who do not see?
- What faith do I need to remain faithful?

Fourth Sunday of Lent (B)

The Readings

2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23 Early and often did the LORD send his messengers.

Ps 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6, Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

Eph 2:4-10 God is rich in mercy

Jn 3:14-21 God so loved the world, he sent his only Son

St Gaspar Del Bufalo

So get rid of all the old yeast" (I Cor 5:7). ... Let your armor be the Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom 13:14.) Woe to us if love of our own convenience, if insubordination, unfaithfulness to our good resolutions, or of leading a life of the spirit should make us guilty before God! Truly, our Society will progress the more happily in proportion to our becoming men of the spirit. Despite the suffering and hardships, which are always present, the enemy shall never triumph. For it is when I am weak that I am strong. (2 Cor 12:10.) ... Those who seek The Lord lack nothing good. (Ps 34:10.) Through the goodness of our most loving Father, we shall indeed see in ourselves continuous miracles of grace. He has loved and still loves us dearly. He tenderly shows us his Sacred Heart as a sweet asylum for souls thirsting for Jesus Christ. Could it be possible that we custodians and dispensers of the heavenly treasures be deprived of the riches which adorned the daughters of Sion? Indeed, neither the place where we live nor the insignia we wear form the essentials of holiness. On the contrary, a holy life, desire for perfection, thirst for the love of God, confidence in him, willingness to bear cheerfully all sacrifices for his sake, these are the qualities that make us saints. Father P. Segneri, Sr., says that people usually revere and venerate us. But, it is one thing to appear as a saint outwardly, and another, to be one in reality. It is not the man who commends himself that can be accepted, but the, man who is commended by the Lord. (2 Cor 10:18). If, until now, we have not seen a greater triumph of the divine glory in the work that we have done, we must attribute the insufficiency to ourselves, for our words did not flow from a truly contrite heart, or at least, not adequately contrite, at the feet of the Crucified.108

Reflection

“Early and often,” sometimes sounds like old-time Chicago voting habits. In today’s first reading it describes our God’s relentless pursuit of us in spite of mocked messengers, despised warnings, and abused prophets. God is faithful. In the end he sent his Son. God so loved the world, he sent his only Son, but is the world ready to listen? Nicodemus comes to him at night, afraid that he might ruin his reputation. Later he speaks up for him in the Sanhedrin and bears some abuse. Finally Nicodemus provides for Jesus’ burial. Slowly but surely Nicodemus comes to identify with Jesus.

108 First circular Letter, 1826

There are two kinds of responses to Jesus and his love. We may fear the dangerous world and develop a fortress mentality, or we may join with him in his mission to the world, never being upset by failure. God has come to us from the beginning, and has often sent his messengers to us to show us how much we are loved. We are, with Nicodemus, slowly moving toward the light. God sent his Son to love, not to condemn. WE still often condemn ourselves. Early and often, then, we must resort to prayer, to doing the truth, and to observing the Lenten practices. St. Gaspar provides the encouragement for today that in spite of past failures we can still hope in as merciful God.

- In what ways do I identify with Jesus?
- How might I better respond to God's desires?
- How might I moved ever more confidently to the light?

Fourth Sunday of Lent (C)

The Readings

Joshua 5:9, 10-12

Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you.

Psalms 34

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord

2 Cor 5:17-21

We are ambassadors of Christ. Be reconciled to God.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

He welcomes sinners and eats with them. Parable of the prodigal son. (see also Saturday of the Second Week)

St. Gaspar

The first thing that is needed is some of that mystical wine of repentance which takes away that lethargy and invigorates our souls anew. "You have allowed your people to suffer, to drink a wine that makes us reel."¹⁰⁹ As a result, in accordance with our need, once we are repentant and contrite of conscience, we find ourselves again on the road that leads to Paradise, and how too does it spur us with hope! There is also the urgent need that we feel for the heavenly bread and mystical wine of your holy and divine love. It offsets the dejection into which we could so easily fall were it not for you, O Lord, who propitiously supply us with nourishment. It is that very same nourishment that produces cheerfulness and gives rise to courage to follow the road to the mountain of perfection. Therefore, the Psalmist said: "Wine to make them cheerful, oil to make them happy and bread to make them strong."¹¹⁰ Yet, the nearer we get to our beloved home, heaven, the more necessary it is to grow strong in merit and rich in works before God. It is on this account that the dear Lord preserves for us special drinks of the choicest wines.¹¹¹

Reflection

This is a Sunday marked by the word "Laetare." We rejoice in more than the mid-point of a forty day fast. The joy of this day is that Jesus has reconciled sinners and invited them to the Eucharistic Feast. The first reading celebrates the joy of coming to the promised land. The Second reading celebrates the joy of becoming a new creation in Christ. The Gospel tells the story of a

¹⁰⁹ Ps 60:3

¹¹⁰ Ps 104:15

¹¹¹ from Fifth Circular Letter, 1831

large feast for a whole village marked for Joy. Fatted calves are not for small family affairs; there would be too much wasted. Reconciliation is a public celebration.

St Gaspar reflects on the journey home marked by repentance and contrition. This leads us directly to the Lord who showers us with the gifts of the heavenly feast to give us strength and life so that we might continue the journey. The banquet bestowed on the prodigal has all the marks of this joyful Eucharistic feast. He has prepared for us his choicest wines. This is the cup of the new and eternal covenant, poured out for all so that sins may be forgiven.

- How is my heart made ready for Joy?
- How would I describe the promised land?
- What is the story of how the Lord has reconciled me?

Monday of the Fourth Week

The Readings

Isaiah 65:17-21 I create a new heavens and a new earth
Psalm 30 I will praise you Lord for you have rescued me
John 4:43-54 Go, your son will live. Jesus heals the court official's son.

St. Gaspar

Let us, therefore, pray for one another and put all our trials in the wounds of the crucified Jesus. There we shall find a healing remedy --- consolation, encouragement and salvation. Let us sincerely love our Society "with the holy kiss"¹¹² so that "we too might live a new life."¹¹³ But above all, let us continually watch that the enemy does not deceive us: and may "the peace of God which is so much greater than we can understand, guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus."^{114,115}

"With regard to your soul, I say, in the first place, that God is leading you along the royal path of the Cross in your particular station of life with both internal and external sufferings. ... It is now a winter season ..- but eventually that lovable spring will arrive which will enable us to breathe again in the fatherland of the saints. Oh how we are comforted in our souls by the mysteries of the Resurrection! Yes, please pray that I too may truly be risen with Jesus, that is to say, to a new life and to an eager pursuit of holiness."¹¹⁶

Reflection

Lent moves into a new depth. The Gospel of John is read from Monday of the fourth week of Lent through Tuesday of Holy Week, focusing on the needs of those who are preparing for the Sacraments of Initiation at the Easter Vigil, and those who are preparing to renew the vows of their baptism at Easter.

112 1 Th 5:26

113 Rm 6:4

114 Ph 4:7

115 from first Circular letter 1826

116 to Mother Maria Nazzarena De Castris, 10 April 1830, Letter 2026, Resources-23, Strokes of the Pen IV, pg 45

In this the second of his signs, Jesus reveals that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The reference to Cana reminds us of the life and joy at that feast and the wine of the new covenant. Jesus challenges us not to focus on sign and wonders but on the faith in his word. The Royal official believed not in the signs and wonders, but in Jesus as the source of life and goes on his way grounded in that faith. That he and his entire family became believers is a source of inspiration for those who are also being initiated in the faith.

St. Gaspar leads us on this same way, through faith in the mysteries of Jesus' cross and his word to the springtime of our own participation in the resurrection. He prays that the enemy may not deceive us with a dependence on signs and wonders, but Gaspar draws us to the wounds of Jesus so that we too may come to the fullness of life in Christ.

- What signs and wonders do I depend on for faith?
- In what ways do I prepare to renew the vows of my baptism?
- What royal path is God leading me on this lent?

Tuesday of the Fourth Week

The Readings

Ez 47:1-9, 12 I saw water coming forth from the temple
Ps 46 The Lord of hosts is with us: our stronghold is the God of Jacob.
John 5:1-3, 5-16 Jesus cures the man at the pool of Bethesda

St. Gaspar

Let us have recourse incessantly to the fountains of Jesus which are his wounds. In them the thirsty soul, like the stag, quenches its thirst with the very sweet waters that are the symbols of the Lord's graces. Indeed, in those fountains we will always find every benefit.¹¹⁷

May our soul be like the dove near mystical waters and let us quench our thirst in Jesus and with Jesus. ... When I use the word always, I mean to say that, in addition to the time that is provided for us to be engaged in this religious adoration, our hearts should ever remain united to the Sacred Tabernacle, the center of peace and of salvation. Also, in no way at all should the reception of communion be set aside. It brings healing to our small infirmities and gives us strength.¹¹⁸

"Therefore, let us walk along the road of perfection, according to the rules that accompany our state of life; and with the crucifix ever before our eyes, let us repeat continuously: *"mihi autem absit gloriari nisi in cruce Domini nostri J.X."*¹¹⁹ for the time will come when, blessed by God, we will be placed on the high throne of glory in the blessed Jerusalem. Amen."¹²⁰

117 to Luigia del Bufalo, Letter 3669, Strokes of the Pen V

118 to Mother Maria Nazzarena De Castris, 9 May 1830, Letter 2034, Resources 23, pg 30

119 Galatians 6:14 *mihi autem absit gloriari nisi in cruce Domini nostri Iesu Christi per quem mihi mundus crucifixus est et ego mundo.* (Vulgate) But may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (NAB)

120 from Letter No. 42 to Msgr. Annibale Ginnasi, February-March, 1813, Resources 4, pg 8

Reflection

John's Gospel continues to be proclaimed during this later part of Lent as the catechumens prepare for baptism and the rest of us prepare our minds and hearts to renew the promises of our own baptism. More than just a physical washing with water, the effect of Baptism is an interior change, cleansing and healing.

This gospel reveals Jesus compassion and desire for our healing. Yet we have to be open to more than just a physical washing and external healing. Did this man believe? Did he know the extravagant compassion of Jesus? Did this healing turn him toward a new way of life, or was he still caught in external laws, customs and rules? We shall never know the answers to those questions, but we can ask those questions of ourselves.

In these fountains of the Lord's wounds, Gaspar teaches, we shall always find the benefit of the Lord's compassion and desire for our healing. Yet we must come with open and trusting hearts that will lead us along the roads to perfection.

- How do show my belief that Jesus desires my healing?
- What healing do I desire?
- How would I show I am willing to live a new life?

Wednesday of the Fourth Week

The Readings

Isaiah 49:8-15,
Psalm 145,
John 5:17-30,

In a time of favor, I answer you, I will never forget you.
The Lord is gracious and merciful
Whoever hears my words and believes in the one who sent me, has eternal life.

St Gaspar

"Ipse est propitiatio"¹²¹- Devotion to the blood of Jesus Christ is the foundation of hope in divine mercy: Because Jesus is our "Advocate: . . . we have an Advocate with the Father, [Jesus Christ the righteous one]".¹²² Look, he says, "upon the face of your anointed."¹²³ For if the prayers of the Patriarchs obtained for the people such singular favors, then we may assume the same for ourselves. [Christ] presents his wounds together with his blood which "speaks more eloquently than that of Abel"¹²⁴ ¹²⁵.

Reflection

The Catechumens hear the word of God, and rise to follow Jesus and to profess faith in him. We do the same, inspired by the Word of God, but inspired also by their concrete example of coming to Jesus and professing faith. This is not magic, or something that happens once for all in our baptism. This is a choice we make each and every day. And when our choices are made in conformity to God's word, then we enter onto the path that leads to freedom and union.

¹²¹ He is an offering for our sins." (1 Jn. 2:2)

¹²² 1 Jn. 2:1.

¹²³ Ps. 84:10.

¹²⁴ Heb 12:24

¹²⁵ from "In omnibus divites factis in Illo," a treatise by St. Gaspar del Bufalo, translated by Fr. John Colacino, CPPS

This is the criteria of those who want to share the very life of God, that we hear his word, believe, and follow his Way. Jesus describes an intimate communion with his Father, and he invites us into this community, into this intimacy. The Father and the Son are life itself, and we are invited to share this life.

St. Gaspar teaches us that the Precious Blood is the foundation for our hope in this divine life, that God who hears and answers the prayers of all the saints will certainly hear and answer our own prayers for life. He says we may assume the same favors for ourselves.

- What has been the foundation of my hope?
- Am I optimistic about my own chances for life, or do I have Hope in what God can do? How do I demonstrate this hope?
- How are my choices in conformity with God's will?

Thursday of the Fourth Week

The Readings

Ex 32: 7-14

The Lord relents in the punishment he threatened on the people

Ps 106

Remember us, O Lord, as you favor your people

Jn 5: 31-45

In whom shall we hope, In whom shall we believe?

St. Gaspar:

"Courage, my dear D. Francesco! Let us become saints and entirely God's. I hope that the fire of the Lord's love will transform us in God, so that each one of us will give evidence to it: Vidi Angelum Dei fortem, volantem."¹²⁶ ¹²⁷

"May the Blood of Jesus be our consolation in this life, and the motive and cause of our hope for holy paradise."¹²⁸

"The Lord deserves everything. Join to that the following thought: it is a great grace of God that he makes use of us as corner stones of this mysterious edifice. He has placed us on the road to becoming saints. Let us establish ourselves firmly in holy humility and in all the virtues; let us be convinced that the substantial thing in the spiritual life is the composure of spirit in God."¹²⁹

Reflection

The worship of the golden calf in the first reading, and the inability of the people of Jesus' day to accept him for who he is, are both presented for our Lenten meditation today. What kind of challenge does our heart hear when we hear Jesus say, "I have come in my Father's name, yet you do not accept me"? The word of God is not supposed to confirm us in our prejudices. It is supposed to challenge us, change us and convert us. As St. Gaspar tells us, this love and overwhelming compassion of God is meant to transform us. In Baptism we are no longer our own.

We belong to God. We become a member of Christ's body. Everything has been given to us, and Gaspar reminds us that the Lord deserves everything.

¹²⁶ I saw a mighty angel of God, flying. cf Rev 5:2, Rev 14:6

¹²⁷ from letter 366 to Fr. Francesco Pierantoni, September 19, 1820

¹²⁸ from Letter No. 367 to Fr. Luigi Locatelli, December 1, 1820

¹²⁹ from Letter No. 370 to Fr. Francesco Pierantoni, December 6, 1820

Our ancestors in the desert fashioned a God out of Gold with their own hands. We are tempted to worship a God of our own creation, but are challenged to accept God as he is. We construct castles of the spiritual life from our own imagination and based in our own desires. The foundation of the Spiritual life is elsewhere for St. Gaspar.

- What "golden calves" surround me?
- Which Jesus do I believe in?
- What is essential for my life?

Friday of the Fourth Week

The Readings

Wis 2: 1, 12-22

Let us lie in wait for the righteous one, because he is inconvenient to us.

Ps. 34

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted.

John 7: 1-2, 10, 25-30

The leaders were looking for an opportunity to kill Jesus

St. Gaspar

"I am completely certain that when you become aware of the kind of ship that I am on, and how the tribulations and the crosses, which I adore in my spirit, are increasing day by day, you will not forget me in your prayers and, in an even more particular way, you will not cease doing whatever you can for the benefit of our society."¹³⁰

"Thorns, crosses, troubles are nothing new in the history of the church. What does this all prove? It proves that ours is a work of God: this is the manifest sign of it. Would you expect the devil to sit by? He cannot get rid of our society: he is just trying to upset it.

I urge all to be tranquil, quiet, well-ordered, recalling that we are all here on this earth to exercise virtue, and God never ceases to provide us with tests. Being enclosed by walls and being associated with companions is not what upsets us; rather, it is ourselves who have the strange idea of selecting our own crosses instead of carrying the ones that God sends. In short, we simply have not sufficiently died to ourselves. At any rate, since all of us have the firm resolution of doing good, we shall not be wanting in the means of making progress."¹³¹

Reflection

Do today's readings make you feel like we are coming close to Good Friday? It is only two weeks a way, and yes, the readings are turning toward the cross. St. Gaspar teaches us that thorns and crosses are nothing new. They are manifest sign that God is at work. The power of evil contends against the presence of grace, and God keeps us tranquil in the midst of battle. If one is to love, one is willing to enter into the struggle and sometimes pain that love entails. Anything else is to remain with the superficial.

¹³⁰ To Msgr. Bellisario Cristaldi, January 12, 1826, Letter 1297, Resources 11, pg 9

¹³¹ To Fr. Tommaso Meloni, June 17, 1827, letter 1638, Resources 11, pg 12

In the gospel, the people had a superficial knowledge of Jesus. They knew where he was born and who his parents were. This is not the kind of knowledge an intimate friend has. This is the kind of knowledge a gossip has. We are called to a deeper more intimate relationship with Jesus. This relationship calls us to carry one another's burdens and to enter into the experience of communion. This kind of life is not without its crosses, yet if we avoid the cross, we remain on the surface and miss the depths of life and love.

- Where is God calling me to go deeper?
- When am I picky about what crosses I'll carry?
- How do I think I know who Jesus is?

Saturday of the Fourth Week

The Readings

Jer 11:18-20	I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter ... but to you, Lord, I have committed my cause.
Ps. 7	O Lord, My God, in you I take refuge.
John 7: 40-53	The plot against Jesus Continues.

St. Gaspar

"My enemies assail me, but you battle with me, or better said you ward off their darts; all I have to do is to hide myself in the great tower of defense which is your most sweet heart, and therein, to allow myself to be governed and directed by you; "Domine vim patior, responde pro me." ¹³²What, then, can I fear when I find myself helped by a Father who is total love, total piety, by a Lord who is totally intent on what is best for me and before whom all creatures tremble.?" ¹³³

Reflection

This seems to be an angry Gospel. We can take it one way and learn a perfect way to defend ourselves against growth and learning. Or we can follow Jesus and learn how to be faithful in the face of verbal assaults and judgments. The Pharisees here are very angry and judgmental. Rather than learning anything from what Jesus says, they characterize him and his people as cursed and backwards, incapable of having any knowledge of the law. The Pharisees know the law, yet they manipulate it for their own purpose.

We can challenge ourselves in two ways with this gospel. First we could ask ourselves if there is anyone in our life that we dismiss with a similar characterization or judgment. This can often be the way we give ourselves permission not to listen. Then we can ask ourselves how peacefully we carry the crosses the Lord has given us. St. Gaspar wrote the above passage from prison as life was going from bad to worse. He had been exiled for the profession of his faith and his loyalty to the church, and yet he continually rejoices in the Lord's continual care for him.

- Whom do I judge or dismiss?
- How do I react when listening to something new and different?
- When do I speak up for Jesus?

¹³² Isaiah 38:14, (Douay) " Lord, I suffer violence, answer thou for me.

¹³³ from Letter No. 62 to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, April 29, 1813, Resources 4, pg. 19

Fifth Sunday of Lent (A)

The Readings

Ez 37:12-14	I will open your graves and have you rise from them.
Psalms 130	With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.
Rom 8:8-11	The One who raised Christ from the dead, will give life to your mortal bodies also.
John 11: 1-45	The Raising of Lazarus

St. Gaspar

God who is so benign, so merciful, who loves you so, has been seeking you for a long time. This is the time when God is calling out to you, that God is showing you the disillusion of earthly things and that they are nothing more than sheer vanity. How is it that we cannot be awakened from that profound sleep of death that oppresses us! How can we be so deaf to the many words of advice! Oh! The ineffable goodness of our loving God who, rather than hurling bolts of lightning toward us in righteous justice and condemning us to perdition, is rather *misericaordia motus*¹³⁴ toward each sinner, as he exclaims: "Your soul is buried in vices and you are yourself your own tomb. Presently, the Lord is drawing near to you; he will let you hear his voice and he will lead you once and for all from that miserable state in which you exist. Oh misled soul, he calls out to you, he invites you, he encourages you, he arouses you by saying *tibi dico surge*¹³⁵. Oh Christian, will you be even more insensitive than a dead person? God is commanding you to rise ... rise up. He is speaking to you - respond to him so that he can return you to life in the Church, your loving mother, who never wants her children, deadened by sin, to be left weeping.¹³⁶

Reflection

Jesus stands and waits at the grave of our hopes and expectations, peering in to the newly enlightened tomb and calling forcefully "unbind him and let him go" There is much that can hold us bound. In our youth we can be bound by the expectations and hopes of our parents or our peers, determined by the choices of others or influenced by the demands and requirements of our culture. As an adult one can be bound by the demands of employers or spouses, or the bitterness of past hurts and traumas, and disillusioned by the misuse by presidents, bosses, clergy and teachers. In relationships one can be tied up by disappointments, bound by one's own expectations and desires.

This is where Jesus stands. This is where Jesus waits, calling with a voice that does not diminish with age, "unbind him and let him go." Nothing holds us so fast as death and yet that does not seem to bind Jesus.

Jesus stands and waits at the horizon of each heart seeking freedom for each one. And the only thing that unbinds us is this Word of mercy that he speaks with his own blood, driving a hope that he places deep in each heart that life is stronger than death.

¹³⁴ Moved with compassion. see Luke 15:20

¹³⁵ I say to you, rise. See Mark 2:11

¹³⁶ From Spiritual Writings, Volume One. From Introduction to the Holy Missions, Vol 16, p.461-462

Martha, in her sadness, still believes. Not the slightest shadow of hesitation grips her. Her faith remains absolute, entire, without reservation. And her faith is what saves her, but it comes nowhere near to describing the life that Jesus gives her. In her faith she does not exhaust the richness of what Jesus is able to bring. She does not reach the limits of what Jesus can be and do for her. Martha's faith, as good as it is still does not determine Jesus. Jesus promises to renew each and every heart. Jesus stands and waits at the table with an unending invitation to come and feast, to receive the gifts of the heavenly banquet. Life is a given, we need simply to enter it; to be changed by it, transformed in it, into his very likeness.

- What is binding me, preventing me from living?
- What unfulfilled desires do I have.
- How afraid am I of Jesus?

Fifth Sunday of Lent (B)

The Readings

Jeremiah 31:31-24 I will place my law within them and write it on their hearts
Psalm 51 Create in me a clean heart.
Hebrews 5:7-9 He learned obedience through suffering
John 12: 20-33 Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

St. Gaspar del Bufalo

I include here the entire letter, Letter 2523

May 22, 1833
Fr. Domenico Silvestri
Pievetorina

Hail to the most Precious Blood of Jesus Christ

Here, briefly, are a few spiritual reflections:

1. *It is not possible to arrive at great rewards except through great labors.*
2. The more exalted our ministry, so much the more does the devil interfere with it as he tries to confound us. We will do all with the help of God's grace if, like boulders in the sea, we remain immobile, though assailed by the waves.
3. The one who supplies us with the motivation to exercise virtue is the one who will help us to move evermore forward in merits.
4. Let us take bitter things as sweet.
5. It is through trials that one realizes the degree of virtue attained. I am speaking of those trials that one did not plan for, those not chosen or selected; nevertheless, they are to be endured by us.
6. By degrees we must attain to that *superabundant joy in every tribulation.*
7. Where the Cross is, there also is the mercy of God. St. Vincent de Paul used to say: my Congregation would cease to be if a single day would go by without crosses. Jesus was

tempted to come down from the cross: "*If you are the son of God ...*", but, for our instruction, he taught us to remain with the cross and to die on the cross.

Devotedly

G. Can. del Bufalo

Rome, May 22, 1833

Reflection

We have been drawn near by the blood of Christ. Jesus made it a habit of dining with tax collectors and sinners. The stories he told were of a God who came to be with those who were hurting and broken, not with those who thought they were well. His association with sinners had gotten him into some trouble with the Pharisees and the temple authorities. Now the Greeks want to see him, and so he knows that the time is now, the troubles will deepen.

How do we respond to trouble and difficulty? Sometimes we try to take control of the situation. We think we can stand on our own two feet or maybe if I do thus and so, God will respond with this or that. I am good and so God must respond accordingly. Or we may respond with resignation and false patience. I know I can do better next time, with more time, experience, or money I should be able to get out of trouble. Or we may react saying that God has abandoned me.

How does Jesus respond to impending trouble? He acknowledges the trouble. He faces it directly and does not deny it, repress it or ignore it. He remains human and vulnerable. There are some things that we have no control over. Jesus cannot control the response of the Pharisees to his ministry, but he does not become defensive or hardened because of it either. He responds with a sense of purpose. "This is why I came!"

Jesus came to call sinners. He came to gather the nations into the kingdom of God. Should he abandon his work just because of trouble? The creator of the universe has joined us in our struggles and taken them on himself. He has not overpowered us or taken away our pain or our humanity. Instead he has gone before us, identifying with us and with the struggles.

This is the covenant promised in our first reading today. It is a new covenant written on human flesh and placed in our hearts. It is a covenant that can be known in our inmost being. All may know the Lord, not just in mind or memory but in flesh and blood.

This new covenant was announced and promised to a sinful people, to an unfaithful people, to a people unable and unwilling to live in covenant with their creator

Into the midst of this fear and hope, this expectation and dreaming, walks an itinerant preacher from Nazareth to announce that the time is now. That the kingdom of God is present; the covenant of God is present in his own body and the time to change and believe is now.

The time is now for the ultimate conflict between darkness and light. The time has come to enter into the struggle that will lead to the cross and finally to glory. It is not a future reality. God has spoken his final word in Jesus and placed the heart of the covenant in the obedience of his only Son.

- How has God taken care of me in time of trouble?
- What have I learned through struggle and suffering?
- How has struggle and difficulty given me a sense of purpose?

Fifth Sunday of Lent (C)

The Readings

Isaiah 43: 16-21	See, I am doing something new
Psalms 126	The Lord has done great things for us, we are filled with joy.
Phil 3:8-14	Because of Christ, I look upon everything else as useless in order to gain him.
John 8:1-11	Let the one without sin be the first to cast a stone

St. Gaspar

"If people return into the arms of God's mercy, all else will easily fall into place. Once consciences are set right, so too will all problems find a solution. I am compassionate with you in the burden that you have with your worries, and I beg God that whatever you do will be accompanied with a copious supply of blessings." ¹³⁷

Reflection

We tend to objectify sin. When we talk about it we are speculative and theoretical. Is sin something personal or relational? Can we own up to it or take responsibility for it? The world treats it as something elsewhere, alien, outside. If it feels good it is morally ok, some would say. They take offense if we describe a particular act as sinful.

Last week we saw in the prodigal son parable that there are two types of sinner. The first is overt, blatant and conspicuous. The second is covert, hidden, concealed behind a facade. The younger son had clearly broken the relationship with his father. The elder son, at least in the culture, was still in the right, and was demanding his rights. But there was no relationship of love with his father either. He wanted justice, but he was just as guilty. Human justice is never complete, never thorough enough, never total or whole. Human justice can never be final.

Now beyond the parable, Jesus is met with the situation in the flesh. It is a trap. If he forgives her he stands against the law of Moses. If he condemns her he could be in trouble with the law of Rome. It is a set up. Was she indeed caught in the act? Where was the partner? He was just as guilty. The situation is very irregular. If real, it would have been taken to the Sanhedrin anyway.

Where is sin here? Is it just outside? Is it just her? What about us? Mercy and Justice come face to face here, and Jesus is Mercy. The challenge is to look first to self. Gaspar knows this implicitly. If each conscience is set right, everything else falls into place.

- How would I describe my relationship with Jesus?
- Is there anyone I dismiss because of judgement? Why?
- Am I just taking care of myself? How would I describe my relationship with the world?

137 from Letter No. 307 to Msgr. Nicola Mattei, July 12, 1820, Resources 4, pg. 37

Monday of the Fifth Week

The Readings

(There is a choice of Gospels today, depending on what was used yesterday)

Dan 13: 1-9,15-17,19,30, 33-62
Psalm 23

Susanna falsely accused

Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil, for you are at my side.

John 8:1-11 (Years A or B)

The Women caught in adultery. Let the one among you without sin be the first to cast a stone at her.

John 8:12-20 (Cycle C)

This testimony is true, Jesus, Light of the World

St. Gaspar del Bufalo

"As the eyes of the dove are open and clear, so also will our intellectual vision of God and of heavenly things become open and clear. With a pure intention we shall seek nothing but his glory and true good of souls: "It follows that if your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light."¹³⁸ It is then that the Lord, transported in love and joy, exclaims: "Your eyes . . . are doves;"¹³⁹ "for they hold me captive."¹⁴⁰ Dear brothers, these very reflections --- these truths --- enable us to draw abundant fruit from our retreat and to acquire thoroughly the science of the saints, the focal point of our heart's desire. The virtue that is acquired, then, becomes most pleasing to our hearts. Whoever looks forward to becoming virtuous, is disgusted with whatever leads away from God. He thirsts only after God, for in the unitive way he will be continually filled with desire and ever thirsting for God himself.¹⁴¹"

Reflection (Year A, B)

see Fifth Sunday of Lent, Cycle C

Reflection (Year C)

To what do our words and actions testify? Do we give witness to darkness or light? Do we witness for ourselves, or for God? It is not only our words that testify. Our actions speak as well. Our selfish actions point to passing things that have a future only in darkness. Our acts of charity testify to what we have become in Christ.

For St. Gaspar our seeking of God and his ways is what opens our eyes and makes them open and clear. Seeking nothing but God's glory we open a way to what is light. The two men in the passage from Daniel, although they are enough witnesses to fulfill the law, testify only to their own selfishness and desire. The results are only fleeting. For those who seek the truth the way is clear and guided by the light that is truth itself.

It is Jesus who is the light of the world. It is Jesus who is truth itself. Following him we remain in the light and the truth is not far from us.

¹³⁸ Matt 6:22

¹³⁹ Songs 4:1

¹⁴⁰ Songs 6:4

¹⁴¹ From The Seventh Circular Letter

- How do I search for the truth?
- How has this lent been a time to come to the light?
- To what do my actions testify?

Tuesday of the Fifth Week

The Readings

Numbers 21:4-9 Whoever looks at the bronze serpent recovers
 Psalm 102 O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come to you.
 John 8:21-30 When you lift up the Son of Man, you will come to realize that I AM.

St. Gaspar

"May our soul be like the dove near mystical waters and let us quench our thirst in Jesus and with Jesus. ... When I use the word always, I mean to say that, in addition to the time that is provided for us to be engaged in this religious adoration, our hearts should ever remain united to the Sacred Tabernacle, the center of peace and of salvation. Also, in no way at all should the reception of communion be set aside. It brings healing to our small infirmities and gives us strength." ¹⁴²

"I send a reply to your very esteemed letter on this third of May, the feast of the Holy Cross, the mystical ladder to heaven, the cathedra of truth, the tree of life, under whose shadow we are to find rest in the peacefulness of the just. Oh what a great book for us is the Cross! It is a summarization of the apologetics of our faith, a practical knowledge for our moral life, and the most tender lessons of love that the Lord has shown. From this book, every soul is encouraged to promote evermore the most important devotion to the Divine Blood, which I highly recommend to your zeal and charity, so that it will become known wherever possible." ¹⁴³

Reflection

The gospel states "many came to believe in him" because he spoke this way. In this week before Holy Week, our catechumens reflect on the many aspects of our community life that assisted them in coming to faith. They still live in a world caught in the drama of belief and unbelief. They are in the world and, with the rest of us, learning how not be "of the world."

We follow Jesus where he goes, doing what he does. We learn how to forgive as he forgives and to love as he loves. In this way it is revealed that we are part of his body, and that we identify with him as he identifies with his father. As healing comes to those in the desert who looked upon the bronze serpent, so does the healing light of truth come to those who come to Jesus when he is lifted up in the Eucharist. For St Gaspar, this forms the core of our heart and our identity, not only when we are at prayer, but at every moment of the day. Jesus identifies the cross as what will reveal him as he is. For Gaspar this is the totality of what we need to know and experience.

- What brought me to belief?
- How closely do I identify with Jesus?
- How closely do I identify with the cross?

142 to Mother Maria Nazzarena De Castris, 9 May 1830, Letter 2034, Resources 23, Strokes of the Pen IV, pg 30

143 to Mrs. Eleonora Rozzi, 3 May 1828, Letter 1929, Strokes of the Pen IV, Resources 23, pg 54

Wednesday of the Fifth Week

The Readings

Dan 3:14-20, 91-92, 95

The Three Young Men saved from the White Hot furnace

Dan 3

Glory and Praise forever

John 8: 31-42

You shall know the truth and the Truth shall set you free. If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

St. Gaspar

"Let us place our trust in the Divine Blood that the Lord will manifest justice and truth, as the cause continues to pend. Let us strengthen all of this, using the intercession of Mary most holy and of Xavier."¹⁴⁴

With respect to what you wrote me, do not at all be fearful. Imitate the Saints as they defend the truth. The things that are being said there, let it be noted once and for all, are not from God. I forgive our opponents because of their good intentions, but I shall never approve what they say nor the way that they do things. ... So, we are right back at the beginning again: everything changes. ... Peace and tranquility everywhere. ... Do not lose your enthusiasm and be happy. ... Make this decision at the foot of the Crucifix.¹⁴⁵

"This is the language of truth, and it is well-known fact that hell itself trembles at the very mention of "divine Blood". Furthermore, because of this confusion of mind, one is led to erroneously judge the good people who then disturb the peace of Your Holiness" magnanimous heart."¹⁴⁶

Reflection

Do you live in a free country? Are people free from fear, desire, want, pressure, addiction, sin, error, falsehood, death, etc? Jesus offers more than ideas and opinions. The truth he brings is also freedom, faithfulness and relationship. A Son and an heir knows a freedom a slave can never realize. Jesus is that Son who is the only way to freedom.

In the time of Jesus there were cultural expectations for a son, especially elder sons. As a father greeted guests for a banquet, the elder son stood at his side barefoot. In this he was a gift from the father to the guests, the father offering his finest as servant of welcome and hospitality. The elder son in the prodigal son parable in Luke did not follow the norm. Neither did the people who listen to Jesus in today's gospel in John.

All of us, sons and daughters alike, are invited to be that son and heir as well. In this we spend time with him, we listen to his word, and we do what he does. This is what Gaspar describes in every tribulation. It simply matters not what the opposition might be. The same freedom, faithfulness and relationship with the father remains, and we remain peaceful in him. The truth sets us free.

¹⁴⁴ to Luigi Fuschi, June 8, 1837, Letter 3441, Strokes of the Pen V, pg 13

¹⁴⁵ to Missionary Father Michele Palombi, January 30, 1836, Letter 3068, Strokes of the Pen V, pg 35

¹⁴⁶ from Letter 1215 to Pope Leo XII, July 29, 1825, Resources 8, pg 40)

- What disturbs my peace?
- How would I describe freedom?
- What are the norms for a son (or a daughter) now?

Thursday of the Fifth Week

The Readings

Gen 17:3-9, The Covenant with Abraham
 Psalm 105 The Lord remembers his covenant forever
 John 8:51-59 Before Abraham ever was, I AM

St. Gaspar

...in this devotion we have a compendium of faith itself; that is why, in the consecration of the chalice, we say: "mysterium fidei"; and, consequently therein lies the salvation of souls. In fact, it is to this that the prophetic oracles, the predictions, the symbols, the figures, the sacrifices of the old covenant have their focus. As we read in Genesis: *He washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes.* (Gen. 49:11). The Hebrews were ordered to taint their doorposts with the blood of the lamb in order to be freed from their chastisements in Egypt, a symbol of the liberation of our souls from diabolical servitude... Without saying too much further, what did Moses do for his people?) *For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you." ... Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.* (Heb 9:19-22) Hear, now, what the Apostle says: *If the blood of goats and calves sanctify such as are defiled, how much more shall the blood of Jesus Christ cleanse our conscience.* (Heb 9:12-14) Without saying everything that could be said, the divine Scriptures are loaded with sacred citations... *Why then is thy apparel red.* (Isaiah 63:2) *And he was clothed with a garment sprinkled with blood.* (Rev 19:13) .One should add only that by means of this devotion the remembrance of our baptism, through which our souls were purged, is revived; we are reminded of penance and the other sacraments. And when asked why, we conclude that it was because: *Thou hast redeemed us to God, in thy blood, And hast made us to our God a kingdom and priests.* (Apoc. 5: 9-10) Other devotions are all means for facilitating Catholic piety, but this devotion is the basis, the sustenance, the essence of all.¹⁴⁷

Growing stronger in brotherly love, let us endeavor to understand more and more the purpose for which God has united us together in our community houses: namely, to be a mutual help in attaining the spirit of fervor and knowledge, in doing the work of the priesthood, in wielding the mystic armaments of the spirit, and no less in acquiring the means conducive to the attainment of our goal. Because of the covenant of the Lord, and the laws of their fathers, the saints of God abode in brotherly love, for one spirit and one faith was ever in them.¹⁴⁸ Blessed, then, are they who , according to their calling, dwell in the house of the Lord, either by preparing themselves for the ministry, as our seminarians, or by doing actual ministerial work, or by participating in these respective occupations as do the lay Brothers. I say: "Happy those who live in your house and can praise you all day long."^{149 150}

¹⁴⁷ XII, 80 81, July 29, 1825, Pope Leo XII

¹⁴⁸ Brev. Rom., Com. Martyr., III Noct., 7 Resp.

¹⁴⁹ Ps 84:4

On the occasion of this holy retreat, let us retire into the Sacred Heart of Jesus which is the Center of peace, the Furnace of love, the Ark of safety, and the mystical banquet hall. Our purpose will be to raise our souls to that height of virtue and sanctity through which we become dear to God and accepted by the people --- "beloved by God and men."¹⁵¹ The urgent need that we have of profiting spiritually from the good that is to be done, the twofold spirit that we must acquire in effecting our own renewal as well as that of others, the particular and general needs of the Church --- all of these furnish us with special incentives to benefit from the Word of God during these days.¹⁵²

Reflection

The passages from John's Gospel continue to prepare the Catechumens and us for the Easter mysteries. Jesus' contemporaries were scandalized by his insistence that he was one with the Father, but that is the very faith these catechumens will take on in their baptism. Jesus fulfills the ancient covenant with Abraham, and everything from Abraham on points to Jesus. Jesus is greater than their ancestor Abraham. Jesus can promise freedom from death, something that Abraham could not do.

The Ancient covenant was inaugurated in Blood, and as everything from Abraham on points to Jesus, for St. Gaspar all these things point to a devotion and a spirituality that is the summary of and essence of all the faith. This is the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. As Jesus points out how Abraham pointed to him and rejoiced to see his day, Gaspar points out all the marks of the old covenant that point to the spirituality of Jesus' Most Precious Blood. The old covenant drew people together into a common bond and enterprise doing God's work, how much more should this new and everlasting covenant bind people together in a bond of Charity? As our faith accepts him as the fullness of all revelation, taking on the name of God, our belonging to him marks the way we live and work together in mutual and lasting charity.

- What does it mean for me to belong to God's family?
- How has belonging to God change my life?
- How do I rejoice in the presence of God made flesh?

150 From Circular Letter 8, 1834

151 Si 45:1

152 From the Fifth Circular Letter, 1831

Friday of the Fifth Week

The Readings

Jer 20:10-13

All those who used to be my friends watched for my downfall. But the Lord is at my side, a mighty hero.... for I have committed my cause to you.

Psalms 18

In my distress I called upon the Lord and he heard my voice.

John 10:31-42

I have done many good works for you to see, works from my father; for which of these are you stoning me.

St. Gaspar

Let us joyfully carry the cross that God gives us: *"I exceedingly abound with joy in all our tribulation."*¹⁵³ Do not think about the past; be at peace, very much at peace and even more so with regard to the present which promises further and more ample blessings. If suffering is a grace, which it truly is, this is a sign of those more mature merits for which God is disposing us. Our lives, more or less, are like winter. In the springtime one sees the work that the winter has produced in the depths of the earth. Be courageous. These are the fruits that arise from the plant of the cross. Let us apply this image of winter to our souls. Never lose hold of a sweet confidence in God; never lose serenity of mind in God. To pray, for example, for more suffering is not, in my judgment, something called for at the present time. Let us willingly suffer whatever God wishes. Let us repeat often: *"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* We are to do the will of God as it is done in heaven. So, make distant those feelings of anguish. I repeat, those fears, those perplexities. *"Why art thou sad, O my soul?"*¹⁵⁴ Let us enjoy the peace which God grants to us and in his divine Heart let us find that feeling of calmness even in all the storms that surround us.¹⁵⁵

Reflection

We begin to witness the unfolding of events that make up the heart of the Christian life. He does not shrink away. They wanted a Messiah according to their own expectations, and yet he remains who he is. Our vocation is to find holiness in him, and as they are called to believe because of the works he does, so are we. We are also called to undertake the same works. We do what Jesus does, seeking to be found faithful in him. We endure whatever comes, not shrinking away. We follow the example of Jesus and the teaching of St. Gaspar.

As Jeremiah called on the Lord in his distress, so we with St. Gaspar, entrust our cause to the Lord. St. Gaspar teaches us that, though we do not pray for suffering, we endure joyfully whatever comes. As Gaspar was known as one of the "joyful ones"¹⁵⁶ in prison, we too take our winters and joyfully trust in spring.

- What is the cross I carry now?
- How would I describe my trust in spring?
- How do I plan to celebrate the Easter mysteries?

¹⁵³ 2 Cor. 7:4

¹⁵⁴ Psalms 41:6

¹⁵⁵ to Mother Maria Nazzarena De Castris, January 1, 1834, Letter 2648, Strokes of the Pen V, 15.1, pg 38

¹⁵⁶ cf. Gaspar's Prison Experiences, pg 91

Saturday of the Fifth Week

The Readings

Ez. 37:21-28

I shall make a covenant with them.

Jer. 31

The Lord will guard us, as a shepherd guards his flock

John 11:45-57

It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed. The Plot against Jesus.

St. Gaspar

I have, indeed, acknowledged the beauty of our Institute which I shall love to the grave, but with a love that is raised up by every spiritual attack, and this, it seems to me, is what I possess.¹⁵⁷

Our vocation, in contrast, is an indication that the devil, in an effort to destroy the spiritual edifice, will try to strike at the very foundation stones. If everyone is provided with the usual means for recognizing and cultivating his vocation, NN. has them in a very special way. He should often reflect on *quomodo intrasti*? Likewise, he should verify the meaning of *manete in vocatione*.

Anyone who finds himself tempted with respect to his vocation should exercise charity twice as much - praying - and being cautious. The ailments that we find in ourselves are never sufficiently recognized and never are they sufficiently cured. This is the reason why so many begin to imagine things that do not exist. The devil keeps on being vexatious and the individual becomes like the sick person who takes it out on the doctor. As a result, he is attributing his trouble to our holy Society, which is something that must be a matter of examination by the members. We pardon everyone; but the cure is urgent. Then, too, crosses will never be lacking, as long as we are here below. One might make a change in the method, but there will be no change in the crosses to which we are heirs as children of the redemption.¹⁵⁸

Reflection

We are not spectators here. It is time for us to enter into the Paschal mystery by allowing our lives, loves, joys, hopes, disappointments, suffering to be made over by Christ's death and resurrection. The cause for hostility here was a good work. Jesus had shown his mastery over the power of death by raising Lazarus, and this good work was a source of fear and malice in the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin.

Caiphas, who did not know the depth of what he was saying, stated that it was better to have one man die for the nation than to have the whole nation destroyed. The irony is that Jesus death did not preserve their stronghold. Jerusalem was destroyed in the 60's - 70's The Evangelist knew the depth of what had happened, that Jesus death would gather into one all the dispersed children of God. At Passover time the High priest is to seek out a lamb to be the spotless sacrifice. This is what Caiphas unknowingly does as the true High priest is feared by the earthly high priest.

For St. Gaspar the way before us is clear. The following of Jesus is beset by opposition from the adversary. Even the good the Missionaries do is a source of resistance. The good the church is

¹⁵⁷ to Sister Maria Giuseppa Pitorri, Letter 3785, Quotation 33 SA, Strokes of the Pen V, 31.23, pg 76

¹⁵⁸ to Missionary Father Orazio Bracaglia, August 14, 1836, Letter 3226 Strokes of the Pen V, 56.7, pg 137, latin note: as far as I can determine the Latin phrases in the previous passage are not scripture quotes. "quomodo intrasti" seems to refer to "how he came to be here" and might be a subtle reference to Matt 22:12. "Manete in vocatione" seems to refer to "remaining in the vocation" or "staying with the call."

engaged in can be a source of misunderstanding and even animosity. So we are not spectators. We take up the cross and follow Jesus.

- What kinds of doubts do troubles and difficulties bring?
- What sorrows and struggles are waiting to be remade by Christ?
- How would I describe my participation in the paschal mystery?

Passion Sunday (A)

Matthew 21:1-11 Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Hosanna to the Son of David
Isaiah 50:4-7 Third Song of Suffering Servant: The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced. I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.
Psalm 22: My God, why have you abandoned me?
Phil 2:6-11 Though he was in the form of God he did not look on equality with God as something to be exploited.
Matthew 26:14 - 27:66 The Passion according to Matthew

Passion Sunday (B)

Mark 11:1-10 Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord
Mark 14:1-15:47, The Passion according to Mark

Passion Sunday (C)

Luke 19: 28-40 Jesus' entry into Jerusalem
Luke 22:14 - 23:56 The passion according to Luke

St. Gaspar

Especially in certain cases, we do everything if we pray and we suffer and if we remain silent. So, any thought that might be productive of anguish is dissipated. God is a God of Peace; yes, in bitter things, even the extremely bitter things: "Ecce in pace amaritudo mea amarissima."¹⁵⁹ So, put aside any feelings of depression; let us joyfully carry the Cross, let us live by the Cross, let us die with the Cross.¹⁶⁰

"While praying one day and while contemplating the Crucifix, it seemed that I heard these words: "Look, my son, at my divine Blood. Through sufferings, I poured it out and through sufferings will its adoration be promoted." Humankind shudders at the word suffering, but it is nevertheless necessary for one to learn to carry the Cross."¹⁶¹

Reflection

For St. Gaspar the cross was the only book we would need. Here alone one learns the lessons of love, not in formulas, prayers, or sermons (or even internet reflections), but in a life given. The cross is the chair of truth. Here we see truly humankind at its worst, crucifying the innocent one. Here, too, we see humanity at its best, in a faithful life given for others. This mystical ladder to

¹⁵⁹ "Ecce in pace" appears to be a quote from Isaiah 38:17(Vulgate) "ecce in pace amaritudo mea amarissima tu autem eruisti animam meam ut non periret proiecisti post tergum tuum omnia peccata mea" Isaiah 38:17 (Douay). Behold in peace is my bitterness most bitter: but thou hast delivered my soul that it should not perish, thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back.

¹⁶⁰ to Mother Dionisia Tirletti, August 23, 1835, Letter 2959, Strokes of the Pen V, 15.6, pg 39

¹⁶¹ to Sister Maria Giuseppa Pitorri, Letter 3785, Quotation 5, Strokes of the Pen V, 15:20, pg. 43

heaven can truly only be lived, not understood. And if it is understood, it can only be grasped by one who has loved, and has struggled to love.

Our God is not an abstraction found in the pages of a book. Our God is found in this person, Jesus. God has become one with us, has experienced our pain, our wants and our disappointments. God's love is to be lived in all its frustrating difficulty by the followers of Jesus. We know that only in giving, completely, and selflessly as Jesus does, do we gain life itself. With St. Gaspar we say over and over, "Superabundo gaudio in omni tribulatione." I exceedingly abound with joy in all our tribulation. (2 Cor. 7:4)

- Can I describe any tragedies or struggles that brought life?
- Whom do I struggle to love?
- What would I need so as to let go of understanding in order to take hold of living?

Monday of Holy Week

The Readings

Isaiah 42: 1-7 First song of the Suffering Servant. "I formed you and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations.
Psalm 27 The Lord is My light and my salvation
John 12:1-11 Mary anoints the feet of Jesus

St. Gaspar

The soul, therefore, loves the life of prayer. *[The king] brought me into the cellar of wine.*¹⁶² The love of God is symbolized by wine. Just as wine when drunk in moderation takes away sadness, so [with prayer]. But as for this wine cellar, happy the person who becomes inebriated! [The soul] ardently seeks God in moments of conversation pondering the extent of his love in becoming our teacher, father and redeemer. How the soul seeks to please him by extending its own ardent longings. It hears from the cross: *'Sitio': "I thirst"*¹⁶³ And what it would not do in response. It weeps for those who do not weep, prays for those who do not pray. It seeks in some way to compensate for the many injustices directed at the Lord, and for his despised honor. It knows too that souls have cost him blood and it meditates on the reasons for divine forbearance. The soul prays for those who labor in the Lord's vineyard, hurrying to do what good it can, never ceasing to pray. "My people," it hears the Lord say, "what damage has been brought forth in the world due to a lack of prayer." Meanwhile, to appease the Father the soul offers the blood of Jesus Christ: *Look upon the face of your anointed.*^{164 165}

¹⁶² Song 2:4 (Douay-Rheims version).

¹⁶³ Jn 19:28

¹⁶⁴ Ps. 84:10.

¹⁶⁵ From "In omnibus divites factis in Illo," a treatise by St. Gaspar del Bufalo, translated by Fr. John Colacino, CPPS. Gaspar quotes the passage "look upon the face of your anointed" three times in the short treatise.

*Ipse est magister*¹⁶⁶ - Once converted, Jesus leads the soul to the wounds of his feet so that it might persevere, saying: "Flee, daughter, from the near occasions of sin, lest you reopen these wounds and trample this blood. Your sins would then serve as nails." [The soul responds]: "*Lord, make my steps steadfast in your paths...*"¹⁶⁷ "*Make my foot stand on level ground.*"¹⁶⁸ "*Walk while you have the light.*"¹⁶⁹ ¹⁷⁰

Reflection

These first three weekdays of Holy Week the Gospel will ask us to reflect on Judas. Today it is a contrast between Judas and Mary of Bethany. Mary enters and anoints the feet of Jesus. She seeks to serve. Judas complains about the extravagance, but it is clear he seeks to serve himself.

In many ways the events of this week can be seen as a march toward death, yet here we find an affirmation of life. In our own day life may seem an adversary to some. The move toward euthanasia and the emphasis on abortion and the death penalty tell us that the sacredness of life is still unknown to some. Jesus, as the very source of life, is unknown to those who seek to kill him. Yet Mary seeks to be the nurturing, hospitable presence to Jesus in spite of all the array of the powers of death against him.

St. Gaspar asks us to imitate the actions of Mary of Bethany. In seeking to somehow compensate for all the acts of violence against life, Gaspar calls his missionaries and his correspondents to prayer, the wine cellar, to the feast where Jesus can be anointed again with the oil of gladness, where even in the face of death we are willing to reverence and affirm life. He draws us to his wounded feet for acts of reverence so as not to become the nails that pierce him. With Mary of Bethany we come to Jesus to serve him and to compensate for Judas who still seeks to serve himself.

- Whom have I nurtured, served today?
- How do I affirm the sacredness of life?
- Describe the wine cellar of prayer to which Jesus has lead you?

¹⁶⁶ He is our teacher

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Ps. 17:5

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Ps. 26:12.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Jn. 12:35.

¹⁷⁰ From "In omnibus divites factis in Illo," a treatise by St. Gaspar del Bufalo,

Tuesday of Holy Week

The Readings

Isaiah 49:1-6

Second Song of the Suffering Servant. I have made you a light of nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth

Psalms 71

I will sing of your salvation

John 13: 21-33, 36-38

I tell you truly, the cock will not crow before you have three times disowned me.

St. Gaspar

The more exalted our ministry, so much the more does the devil interfere with it as he tries to confound us. We will do all with the help of God's grace if, like boulders in the sea, we remain immobile, though assailed by the waves. Let us take bitter things as sweet. It is through trials that one realizes the degree of virtue attained. I am speaking of those trials that one did not plan for, those not chosen or selected; nevertheless, they are to be endured by us. By degrees we must attain to that *superabundo gaudio in omni tribulatione*.¹⁷¹ 1). Where the Cross is, there also is the mercy of God. St. Vincent de Paul used to say: "my Congregation would cease to be if a single day would go by without crosses." Jesus was tempted to come down from the cross: ... but, for our instruction, he taught us to remain with the cross and to die on the cross.¹⁷²

Reflection

Today we hear a comparison between Judas and Peter. Judas sets out on his quest to force God's hand, and Peter, as hapless as ever, professes his undying devotion. What basically separates Judas and Peter is the difference between a hope for power and a hope for relationship or service.

This is the night of betrayal and denial. "It was night," the gospel proclaims revealing the triumph of darkness as the enemies of Jesus seek to put an end to his influence. Jesus remains the obedient servant. Who he is does not change because of denial and betrayal. His faithfulness is lifelong, and he remains faithful through every trial, dryness and failure.

Gaspar calls us to follow Jesus in this faithfulness. The cross is our inheritance as he has told us many times before. Taking bitter things as sweet we shall remain faithful regardless of the trials life sets before us. It may seem unreasonable to abound with joy in the midst of tribulation as St. Gaspar calls us to. Yet he says that we must come to this gradually. With Peter's hope for relationship and devotion, we shall come through failure and trial to the perfection to which Jesus calls us.

- Where am I seeking to have power?
- How have I wanted to force God's hand?
- How does my devotion compare with Peter's?

¹⁷¹ We have heard St. Gaspar quote this passage before. This seems to be one of St. Gaspar's favorite phrases. I know it is at least in four of his circular letters. The last quote, Friday of last week was from Strokes of the Pen V. This one is from Strokes of the Pen IV. Here again is the translation from the Vulgate/Douay: "*Superabundo gaudio in omni tribulatione.*" (I exceedingly abound with joy in all our tribulation. 2 Cor. 7:4

¹⁷² to Missionary Father Domenico Silvestri, 22 May 1833, Letter 2523, Resources 23, Strokes of the Pen IV, 9.54, pg 52

Wednesday of Holy Week

The Readings

Isaiah 50:4-9 Third Song of the Suffering Servant, I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard.
Psalm 69 Lord, in your great love, answer me.
Matt 26:14-25 One of you is about to betray me.

St. Gaspar

"Prescinding from the first centuries in the Church, centuries productive of martyrs, in the following epochs which history records for us, we note how one of the other dogma was attacked, how sacred things were subjected to scorn in one or their part of the Catholic world. In our miserable times, the crisis in the people is a general one, with indescribable perversion of basic principles and of proper living so as to hurl an insult at the redemptive act and, through human malice, to frustrate the application of the merits of Jesus Christ who has redeemed us by the price of his Blood. Now, Blessed Father, is it not necessary to rekindle apostolic zeal and follow the inspirations of soul that are so favored by God so that we can revive in the memories of these people the inestimable price of our redemption and attempt to stir them to repentance and to tears? Is it not also a fact that Sacred Scripture itself gives us the steps to take for a reform? *Pacificans per Sanguinem Crucis eius sive quae in coelis, sive quae i terris sunt?*¹⁷³ Do we ourselves not know that *Christus dilexit ecclesiam tradidit semetipsum pro ea*¹⁷⁴ ...acquisivit sanguine suo?¹⁷⁵ Does not Divine Wisdom tell us that *justificati in Sanguine salvi erimus ab ira per ipsum?*"^{176 177}

Reflection

The self-centered make the infinite finite. Does human life have a price? Can it be reduced to a few pieces of silver? Judas focuses on himself and his own hope for glory. He says, "How much will you give ME?" St. Gaspar has said that in our own day sacred things would be subjected to scorn. This is as true today as it was in Gaspar's time.

The disciples seem unaware of the impending disaster. They are surprised, yet their focus remains on self. "Not me!" They are unaware because as yet they are not fully involved in Jesus' life and ministry.

This day sets the stage for the celebration of his death and resurrection. It points us to the feast tomorrow and the next day. His betrayal is for us a reminder that we need to seek repentance for those parts in us that still focus on self and ultimately betray what Jesus came for. Gaspar reminds

¹⁷³ Colossians 1:20 (Vulgate) et per eum reconciliare omnia in ipsum pacificans per sanguinem crucis eius sive quae in terris sive quae in caelis sunt. Colossians 1:20 (RSV) and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

¹⁷⁴ Ephesians 5:25 (Vulgate) et Christus dilexit ecclesiam et se ipsum tradidit pro ea. Ephesians 5:25 (RSV) as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

¹⁷⁵ Apoc 1:5 (Vulgate) et ab Iesu Christo qui est testis fidelis primogenitus mortuorum et princeps regum terrae qui dilexit nos et lavit nos a peccatis nostris in sanguine suo.

Rev 1:5 (RSV) and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood

¹⁷⁶ Romans 5:9 (Vulgate) Christus pro nobis mortuus est multo igitur magis iustificati nunc in sanguine ipsius salvi erimus ab ira per ipsum. Romans 5:9 (RSV) Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

¹⁷⁷ XII, 80 81, July 29, 1825, to Pope Leo XII

us that the scorn shown for sacred things and for life itself must propel us toward that devotion and spirituality which alone brought us to life. He has made peace through the blood of his cross, he who loved us and gave himself up for us. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood be all glory and honor.

- How focused on myself have I been this Lent?
- How involved am I in his life and ministry?
- How would I celebrate the value of his life?

Holy Thursday

The Readings

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14

Rules for the Passover Meal; "seeing the blood, I will pass over you." a memorial feast for all generations.

Psalm 116

blessing cup is a communion with the blood of Christ

1 Cor 11: 23-26

This is my Body, This the new covenant in my blood.

John 13:1-15

The washing of the Feet. As I have done, so you must do.

St. Gaspar

It [the soul] loves God because it sees how he has loved the soul from all eternity: He first loved us.¹⁷⁸ It reconsiders especially the themes concerning redemption and exclaims: The love of Christ impels us.¹⁷⁹ It does so especially when seeing how far that love went when in his capacity as redeemer, [Christ] shed his blood to the last drop: He loves us and has washed away our sins in his blood.¹⁸⁰ Faint with love, the soul exclaims, "Oh wounds, oh precious blood of my Lord, that I might praise you in eternity!" What a great thing it is that the blood of Jesus is even our drink in the Eucharist and how, finally, through the merits of the blood of Jesus Christ we shall arrive in paradise. With your blood you purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation]. You made them a kingdom. . . .^{181 182}

"Herein lies the glory of the priesthood, instituted for applying the price of redemption to souls, so that the divine Blood will not have been shed in vain, due to our own fault, as we note in the Holy Scriptures: "*Quae utilitas in Sanguine meo?*"¹⁸³ ... *Sanguis Jesu Christi emendabit conscientias nostras ab operibus mortuis.*"^{184 185}

178 1 Jn. 4:19

179 2 Cor. 5:14.

180 Rv. 1:5 (Jerusalem Bible translation)

181 Rv. 5:9-10

182 from the treatise "In omnibus divites factis in Illo" by St. Gaspar

183 Psalms 30:10, "What gain would there be from my lifeblood." Gaspar quotes this passage quite often in his letters, eg. the June 1827 letter to Cristaldi, the July 1825 letter to Leo XII, as well as the letter quoted here. It is also used in his May, 1827 letter to Santarelli on the Month of the Precious Blood

184 Hebrews 9:14 (Vulgate) quanto magis sanguis Christi qui per Spiritum Sanctum semet ipsum obtulit immaculatum Deo emundabit conscientiam vestram ab operibus mortuis ad serviendum Deo viventi Hebrews 9:14. (Douay) How much more shall the blood of Christ, who by the Holy Ghost offered himself unspotted unto God, cleanse our conscience from dead works, to serve the living God?

185 from Letter 1240 to Pope Leo XII, September 1, 1825, Resources 8, Strokes of the Pen II, XXIII, 2

Reflection

It would have been a normal gesture of hospitality, providing water for your guests so they could wash the dust of the road from their tired feet. Maybe there would have been an extra measure of devotion on the part of the disciple who assisted the master in washing his feet. But here we have another example of how Jesus has turned the world upside down. The master washes your feet.

But as he got up from the table and "took off his outer robe," we have an indication of something larger. He has taken off more than his robe. St. Gaspar wants us to see how far this love has taken him. He has emptied himself completely. He had no fear that his role or prestige or his person would be diminished. He did not even fear death. He was now in a place where he knows who he is, where he is from and where he is going.

And during supper Jesus, knowing that God had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

It is the same for us. This is no mere gesture. This is not simply a sign or re-enactment. This is not about some past event. This is a celebration of who we are now and who we are to become.

This day also marks the origin of the priesthood. This is the glory of the priesthood, as Gaspar teaches, to effect and make known this incredible love of Jesus. Those who have been washed in him, who now share completely in him, in his life and his mission, we know who we are, where we have come from and where we are going. Death has no more power over us. We can live without fear and do what needs to be done because we know that nothing, not even betrayal, will prevent the reign of God from being revealed in us.

- How do I participate in foot-washing ministry?
- Is the priesthood a gift or a bother? Why?
- How does the Eucharist lead me to give of myself?

Good Friday

The Readings

Isaiah 52: 13-53, 12

Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant. He surrendered himself to death, while bearing the faults of many.

Ps 31

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

Heb 4: 14-16, 5: 7-9

he learned obedience from what he suffered, and when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him

The Passion according to John

St. Gaspar

Please do me the favor of telling the Holy Father that perhaps he, one day, will realize what he does not presently see. I am not speaking about myself but about the Society. He will weep for having used during an audience a procedure which was not in accordance with God. Only God knows whether I shall survive all of the bitter things that have occurred. I have not lost sight of

my conformity to his divine will, for doing his most loveable divine will is my total pursuit. However, I am not made of iron or of bronze. To face continuous, baseless rebukes and invectives, without due process, both of my conduct and that of others, is a very bitter chalice to drink. All of this, however, is very little, considering my own demerits. Still, I glory in being a son of the Church and, wretched though I may be, I have not lost my faith. Excuse this outburst of mine which is meant for you alone, for I am besieged with sadness, yet I have not allowed any of this to leak out even to my companions, realizing that the war that is being waged is brought on by the enemy, and in the most despicable way.¹⁸⁶

St. Maria de Mattias

"By silence and prayer we will come to understand much better the preciousness of the cross, made sacred by the precious blood of Cross." 1863

"The Cross is always dear to those who truly love Jesus. Whoever love the Cross gives a sure sign that she holds in her heart a genuine love for Jesus. My dear, let us never move away from the Cross, for this is the key to the treasures of heaven. This is the gate of Paradise." 1847

Reflection

St. Gaspar writes a great deal about the cross. The cross can be found also in the writings of St. Maria de Mattias, foundress of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ. As she said, "The cross is always dear to those who truly love Jesus." For all the saints the cross stands at the center of our lives. For Francis de Sales it was the only road to heaven. For St. Gaspar it was the only book to read.

I remember once a couple experiencing trouble with their marriage. After many months they were communicating more effectively. One day there was a crisis. He was laid off from work. Her work was cut back. There was fear and frustration and anxiety. When they came to talk to me I noticed she was identifying with his fear rather than telling him to work harder. He was listening to her anxiousness without taking responsibility for it or telling her to settle down. I remarked how they were caring for one another and doing so well. She responded by asking, "if we are doing so well, why is life falling apart?"

Well, we follow someone who died on a cross, who experienced the worst and cruelest form of capital punishment. Life will fall apart. The struggles and trials of life and love will prove us and refine us into fire tried gold. Maturity comes, for St. Gaspar, through "thorns, crosses and hardships." What we will discover in the midst of these crosses is unconditional love.

- What are the thorns and hardships now?
- What successes do I adore?
- How might I take better care of another person?

186 from Letter 1207 to Msgr. Bellisario Cristaldi, July 20, 1825, Resources 8, Stroke of the Pen II, pg 29-30

Holy Saturday, During the day

The Readings

There is no Eucharist celebrated on this day, until the beginning of the Great Easter Vigil this evening. During this time the Church keeps Vigil and tells the story of salvation history.

St. Gaspar

The apostles, indeed, at first generously welcomed and with fullness of heart followed the Savior. But later they became timid and weak to such a degree that they deserted him during the Passion: "Then all the disciples deserted him and ran away."¹⁸⁷ "So, it sometimes happens that a person dedicates himself freely to God, but in the course of time that havoc does not the infernal enemy effect, and that at the expense of conscience? How often does not your wane of fervor open the way to disillusionment, gloom, melancholy and even regret of the step you have taken? This is a source of delight for the enemy. But woe to you if prompt resistance is not offered to his diabolical suggestions! How did the Lord deal with his apostles? He assembled them in the holy Cenacle under the august patronage of his own Mother. Then he called them to recollection, silence and prayer that they thereby implore a renewal of spirit and religious generosity: "The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord with great power . . . "¹⁸⁸ So, too, God works in us during the days of retreat in order to be able to anticipate and forestall every attack of the devil. My [friends], God has called you to this figurative Cenacle, this retreat. He wishes to communicate his spirit to you in a particular way. He wants to strengthen your hearts, fortify you with virtue and lead you to holiness, so that you may leave this retreat spiritually refreshed and with the enthusiasm of youth to be able to fight the enemy of your soul with greater strength and courage. When you have subdued your foes from within, may you become apostles of God's glory.¹⁸⁹

Reflection

Why is this night different from all other nights? On other Saturdays we have a 5:30pm Mass, but on this night it is much later and lasts much longer. On other nights we have three readings; on this night we tell the whole story. On other nights we reach to the holy water stoops at the doors, but on this night everyone comes to the baptismal font. This is the day of preparation for the great vigil. On this night the pillar of fire will appear again in the desert of our lives and lead us anew to the promised land of Jesus life and truth.

This should not be like any other Saturday. The experience of the previous day's passion should lead us into a time of silence, prayer, and reflection. For those working for a church it seems to be a day of flowers and of cleaning, but the preparation is for the greatest liturgy of the church's year. St. Gaspar calls us in this silence to a renewal of faith. Many people around the world will enter the font tonight and become a new creature in Christ. For the rest of us it is a time to renew our vows. It will be an exceptional time of grace as a new born people enters the world armed with the light of faith.

- How do I plan to spend the holiest night of the year?
- Is there a particular grace I desire this night?

¹⁸⁷ Mt 26:56

¹⁸⁸ Ac 4:33

¹⁸⁹ From the Third Circular Letter

- Where in my life am I looking for a renewal of Spirit and religious generosity?

Easter Sunday

The Readings

Acts 10:34, 37-43	We have eaten and drunk with him after his resurrection from the dead
Ps 118	This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad.
Col 3:1-4	When Christ our life appears, then you shall appear with him in glory.
Luke 24:1-12	Why do you search for the living one among the dead.

St. Gaspar del Bufalo:

"With regard to your soul, I say, in the first place, that God is leading you along the royal path of the Cross in your particular station of life with both internal and external sufferings. ... It is now a winter season ... but eventually that lovable spring will arrive which will enable us to breathe again in the fatherland of the saints. Oh how we are comforted in our souls by the mysteries of the Resurrection! Yes, please pray that I too may truly be risen with Jesus, that is to say, to a new life and to an eager pursuit of holiness."¹⁹⁰

"Let us, therefore, pray for one another and put all our trials in the wounds of the crucified Jesus. There we shall find a healing remedy --- consolation, encouragement and salvation. Let us sincerely love our Society "with the holy kiss"¹⁹¹ so that "we too might live a new life."¹⁹² But above all, let us continually watch that the enemy does not deceive us: and may "the peace of God which is so much greater than we can understand, guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus."^{193 194}

Reflection

The end of the Lenten season has come, swallowed in the Paschal mysteries celebrated in the Holy Triduum. And now it is day. The suffering one is vindicated. Spring has come. The flowers in the church sanctuaries around the globe give witness to a flowering of new life.

The old life is gone. The past is past. Death is defeated, and life forever is claimed. Are you not aware that you who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? It is so that by bearing a likeness to his death we may also bear a likeness to his resurrection. Life as you have lived it is demanded of you. You have died and the life you live now is in Christ.

St. Gaspar who has taught us about the cross, shows us the way to the springtime of Easter. May we too live in the power of the resurrection, and be comforted and enlivened by these mysteries.

- What is the most significant thing that happened to you in this Lenten season?
- What about these mysteries we celebrate give you the most hope?
- Describe how the peace of the risen Lord holds guard over your life?

¹⁹⁰ to Mother Maria Nazzarena De Castris, 10 April 1830, Letter 2026 Strokes of the Pen IV, 9.28, pg. 45

¹⁹¹ 1 Th 5:26

¹⁹² Rm 6:4

¹⁹³ Ph 4:7

¹⁹⁴ From the First Circular Letter, 1826

The Saints and Feasts during Lent

February 22, Chair of Peter, Apostle

Readings

1 Peter 5:1-4, Be shepherds of the flock
Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want
Matt 16:13-19, You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church

St. Gaspar

The Archconfraternity under the very noble title of the Most Precious Blood of Jesus Christ, established by your Holiness at the altar of the Crucifix in S. Nicola in Carcere, which has as its principle objective the propagation of the devotion and the frequenting of the sacraments by the people, not finding any better means for succeeding in this sublime purpose than the promotion of the practice of holy Missions, already carried out in various dioceses... so as to attain the aimed-for objective of the institution of the Archconfraternity, that is, that souls will be cleansed in the Blood of the Redeemer through the Sacrament of Penance.¹⁹⁵

He is our shepherd. Because Jesus while praying to the Father calls out to us with *inexpressible groanings*,¹⁹⁶ he is also the Shepherd who *lays down his life for his sheep*.¹⁹⁷ But in seeking his little flock, how reddened is the path of the good shepherd with blood. How costly we are to Jesus, oh [you his] faithful ones! He calls out to us with as many mouths as he has wounds. He shows us his opened heart: "Come," he says, to cleanse yourself in this blood.¹⁹⁸

Reflection

We do not normally celebrate feasts about furniture. This feast focuses on the ministry of Peter, on his mission of teaching and on the unity of faith.

As we believe in the Word made flesh, in salvation becoming visible to us, we also rejoice in the visible church, in the outward signs of its sacraments, and in the word remaining visible in the ministries of the church and in the charity exercised among its members. Without that visible principle of unity in the successor of Peter we could well spin off into competing ideologies and theories, based on our own opinions and our individual efforts. Instead we belong to the body of Christ recognizing that the successor of Peter fills that office as head of the Body.

St. Gaspar had a great respect for the office and ministry of the Holy Father. He suffered exile with Pope Pius VII, rejoiced in his return to Rome, and responded to his wishes in exercising this ministry. He was also deeply pained with the Holy Father's criticism based on false information, and he was not afraid to challenge the Holy Father on his decisions about the town of Sonnino.

The readings today challenge us on our willingness to serve as shepherds, to pour out

¹⁹⁵ Letter to Pius VII, November 1818, petitioning the Holy Father for various faculties for the preaching of Missions

¹⁹⁶Cf. Rm. 8:26.

¹⁹⁷Cf. Jn. 10:15.

¹⁹⁸ From the Treatise by St. Gaspar del Bufalo, "In omnibus divites factis in Illo" The treatise is based on the text of 1 Cor. 1:5: "In everything you have been enriched in him."

our lives for another. As Jesus chose Peter, he also chooses us to follow him in a particular way, to give of ourselves in service to one another. St Gaspar is our example in his respect for the Successor of Peter, but also in his desire to shepherd the people in the Redeeming love of Christ.

- Whom am I called to shepherd?
- What can I do to further the unity of my family, of my church?
- What must I do to gain greater respect for the Office of the Holy Father?

March 19, St. Joseph

The Readings

2 Sam 7:4-5,12-14,16

I will be a father to him, and he a son to me, the throne of David will endure forever.

Psalm 89

The Son of David will live forever

Rom 4:13,16-18, 22

Abraham believed and became the father of many nations.

Matt 1:16, 18-21, 24

Joseph awoke from the dream and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

St. Gaspar

"As for me, I am cheerful, tranquil and content, only because I am doing the will of God. I proclaim that I want to live and die with total abandonment to him."¹⁹⁹

"I adore the will of God"²⁰⁰

"Likewise I would like you to be assured of the will of God in regard to your vocation. Excessive fear causes agitation too, as one can readily imagine. Oh, my beloved friend, why become anxious as long as we are in the hands of God? Is he not a most loving Father? Does he not take care of us? Does he not dispose all things for our own good? He used Moses to humiliate Pharaoh and, in general, infirma eligit, ut fortia quaeque confundat.²⁰¹ When we use the 24 hours of the day for God, in the mystical bed of his will, we have done everything. This does not deny, however, the necessity of prayer and faith in God."²⁰²

"But how is Jesus to be imitated? Look at him for just a short while. As an example to us, he is obedient to Joseph and to Mary and lives in the humblest of homes. He is employed in manual labor, shows himself to be a model of silence and is withdrawn from the world, a benefactor to all." ...Seek, then, to be of service to the Society and respect the will of the Creator in his creatures. No task is menial if it tends to glorify the Almighty. On the contrary, your work is similar to that of Jesus Christ who aided his foster father, St. Joseph. Purity of intention alone is necessary for you to properly regulate your interior and exterior actions. Realize, too, that a

199 from Letter No. 22 to Countess Virginia Malaspina Carocciolo, June 18, 1811

200 from letter 873 to Mr Giovanni Francesco Palmucci, April 14, 1824, Resources 8, pg 54

201 see 1 Cor 1:27, God chose the weak...to shame the strong

202 from letter 1101 to D. Domenico Silvestri, April 19, 1825, Resources 8, pg. 54

hidden and humble life is a special shield against vanity and human glory."²⁰³

I give thanks to God for the concern that you nourish in promoting the glories of the Divine Blood and I hope that abundant blessings will be your reward. Our Father Amici is putting the final touches on the little work on St. Joseph to be printed after having gathered together a good number of supporters, the printing will be undertaken. This great saint is the special protector of our death. People are interested in this devotion.²⁰⁴

Reflection

St. Joseph was a just man. He was faithful to the laws and customs, the ways of Israel. And yet he was also faithful to dreams, hopes and a vision of what God desires. More than being the patron of the Church, he is the patron of the hidden doing of God's will. In the silence of his sleep, we hear and see nothing. In his dreams he sees everything.

Imagine what his anxious moments must have been like. He desired to do what was right and just, but he also desired to do what was fair for Mary. Gaspar would have us look at our own anxious moments and know that just as Joseph was in the hands of God, so are we. Gaspar would encourage us to seek God's will with the same energy and devotion as Joseph.

Joseph challenges us to love the will of God and to trust the will of God with the same tangible faith. This faith would get us up from our sleep to follow a dream of God's way without fear or anxiousness.

- How do I show I love the will of God?
- What dreams have I failed to follow?
- In what ways could I follow God's will even as it goes against social values of my time?
- What makes me anxious?

March 25, The Annunciation

The Readings

Isaiah 7: 10-14

The virgin will be with child, and bear a son.

Ps 40

Here I am Lord, I come to do your will

Hebrews 10:4-10

I have come to do your will O God

Luke 1:26-38

I am the Handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.

St. Gaspar

Think no longer about the past. Do not be the cause of your own crosses. Live joyfully with the Center of every good gift ... the will of God. May this be our mystical food, our comfort, our every good. Let us live in God, for God and with God.²⁰⁵

203 From Third Circular Letter, 1829

204 Letter 1786, July 31, 1828, Giovanni Francesco Palmucci

205 Letter 2752, to Mother Maria Nazzarena De Castris, July 18, 1834

So, let us leave everything in the hands of God and, in this regard, we will be doing everything to fulfill the divine will.²⁰⁶

Let us remember that the most holy Virgin is the aqueduct of divine mercy, our advocate and, after Jesus, our hope and our protection.²⁰⁷

I have entrusted our congregation and its members to Mary most holy. From heaven, she will see to its protection and will bless it lovingly.²⁰⁸

The love of Jesus Christ that I nourish for you urges me to have you participate in the delightful consolations that the Lord has given to me during the missions in Umbria which I completed today. I attribute everything to the efficacy of the Blood of Jesus Christ, the prayers of most holy Mary and St. Francis Xavier, my most beloved protector.²⁰⁹

The Reflection

We celebrate the day that God turns the world up side down. It is in Mary and through Mary that the situation of humanity and of the world has been reversed, and we have in some way re-entered into the splendor of the first creation. Mary is the instrument that links Jesus to the human race. God visits earth, comes to us where we are, and raises our humanity now to an incomparable dignity.

The greatest events, human or divine, takes place in absolute silence. The world does not notice or pay attention. The invitation comes from a messenger of God and God's Word takes flesh in the assent of a young girl.

There is nothing to prevent us from doing the will of God. No human deficiency can ever prevent us from doing God's will. Here I am, she says, I come to do your will. We gather in wonder and awe, also like St. Gaspar to fall in love with God's will. For him, her "yes" becomes the aqueduct, the font of all the graces of living water flowing to us in the sacraments.

- How does the world avoid noticing God's will?
- How do I show love for the will of God?
- When was the last time I said, "I am the servant of the Lord?"

206 Letter 2961, to Ignazio Lesinelli, August 28, 1835

207 from Letter No. 65 to Countess Lucrezia Ginnasi, May 10, 1813

208 from Letter No. 122 to Msgr. Bellisario Cristaldi, August 27, 1815

209 Letter No. 293 to Msgr. Bellisario Christaldi, June 5, 1820