

Wednesday of the Third Week of Advent

Ember Wednesday

The Liturgical Year

Dom Prosper Gueranger

The Lord is now nigh; . come, let us adore.

To-day the Church begins the fast of '*Quatuor Tempora*', or, as we call it, of Ember days: it includes also the Friday and Saturday of this same week. This observance is not peculiar to the Advent liturgy; it is one which has been fixed for each of the four seasons of the ecclesiastical year. We may consider it as one of those practices which the Church took from the Synagogue; for the prophet Zachariah speaks of the fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months. Its introduction into the Christian Church would seem to have been made in the apostolic times; such, at least, is the opinion of St. Leo, of St. Isidore of Seville, of Rabanus Maurus, and of several other ancient Christian writers. It is remarkable, on the other hand, that the orientals do not observe this fast.

From the first ages the *Quatuor Tempora* were kept in the Roman Church, at the same time of the year as at present. As to the expression, which is not infrequently used in the early writers, of the three times and not the four, we must remember that in the spring, these days always come in the first week of Lent, a period already consecrated to the most rigorous fasting and abstinence, and that consequently they could add nothing to the penitential exercises of that portion of the year.

The intentions, which the Church has in the fast of the Ember days, are the same as those of the Synagogue; namely, to consecrate to God by penance the four seasons of the year. The Ember days of Advent are known, in ecclesiastical antiquity, as the fast of the tenth month; and St. Leo, in one of his sermons on this fast, of which the Church has inserted a passage in the second nocturn of the third Sunday of Advent, tells us that a special fast was fixed for this time of the year, because the fruits of the earth had then all been gathered in, and that it behoved Christians to testify their gratitude to God by a sacrifice of abstinence, thus rendering themselves more worthy to approach to God, the more they were detached from the love of created things.

'For fasting,' adds the holy doctor, 'has ever been the nourishment of virtue. Abstinence is the source of chaste thoughts, of wise resolutions, and of salutary counsel. By voluntary mortifications, the flesh dies to its concupiscences, and the spirit is renewed in virtue. But since fasting alone is not sufficient whereby to secure the soul's salvation, let us add to it works of mercy towards the poor. Let us make that which we retrench from indulgence, serve unto the exercise of virtue. Let the abstinence of him that fasts, become the meal of the poor man.'

Let us, the children of the Church, practise what is in our power of these admonitions; and since the actual discipline of Advent is so very mild, let us be so much the more fervent in fulfilling the precept of the fast of the Ember days. By these few exercises which are now required of us, let us keep up within ourselves the zeal of our forefathers for this holy season of Advent. We must never forget that although the interior preparation is what is

absolutely essential for our profiting by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, yet this preparation could scarcely be real unless it manifested itself by the exterior practices of religion and penance.

The fast of the Ember days has another object besides that of consecrating the four seasons of the year to God by an act of penance: it has also in view the ordination of the ministers of the Church, which takes place on the Saturday, and of which notice was formerly given to the people during the Mass of the Wednesday. In the Roman Church, the ordination held in the month of December was, for a long time, the most solemn of all; and it would appear, from the ancient chronicles of the Popes, that, ·excepting very extraordinary cases, the tenth month was, for several ages, the only time for conferring Holy Orders in Rome. The faithful should unite with the Church in this her intention, and offer to God their fasting and abstinence for the purpose of obtaining worthy ministers of the word and of the Sacraments, and true pastors of the people.

The Church does not read anything, in the Matins of to-day, from the prophet Isaiah: she merely reads a sentence from the chapter of St. Luke, which gives our Lady's Annunciation, to which she subjoins a passage from St. Ambrose's Homily on that Gospel. The fact of this Gospel having been chosen for the Office and Mass of today, has made the Wednesday of the third week of Advent a very marked day in the calendar. In several ancient Ordinaries, used by many of the larger churches, both cathedral and abbatial, we find it prescribed that feasts falling on this Wednesday should be transferred: that the ferial prayers should not be said kneeling on that day; that the Gospel *Missus est*, that is, of the Annunciation, should be sung at Matins by the celebrant vested in a white cope, with cross, lights, and incense, the great bell tolling meanwhile; that in abbeys, the abbot should preach a homily to the monks, as on solemn feasts. We are indebted to this custom for the four magnificent sermons of St. Bernard on our blessed Lady, which are entitled: *Super Missus est*.

As the Mass of the Ember days is seldom sung, excepting in churches where the canonical Office is said, as also that we might not add unnecessarily to this volume, we have thought it advisable to omit the Masses of Ember Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday of Advent. The Station for the Wednesday is at St. Mary Major, on account of the Gospel of the Annunciation, which, as we have just seen, has caused this day to be looked upon as a real feast of the blessed Virgin. Having to speak, later on, of this mystery, in the proper of saints, we will conclude this Wednesday with a prose of the middle ages, in honour of our blessed Lady's receiving the angel's salutation, and with a prayer taken from one of the ancient liturgies.

Prose in Honour of the Blessed Virgin
(Taken from the missal of Cluny of 1523.)

The angel, entering the Virgin's chamber, and gently bidding her not to fear, says to her:

Hail, Queen of virgins, thou shalt conceive in thy womb the Lord of heaven and earth; and still remaining a Virgin, thou shalt bring forth the salvation of mankind, Oh gate of heaven bringing to the world the remedy of its iniquities!

How shall this be, replied the Virgin, for I know not man? How wouldst thou have me break the vow which I have sworn to keep?

The grace of the Holy Ghost shall accomplish all these things, said the angel. Fear not, but rejoice. I assure thee thy virginity shall be left intact: the power of God shall maintain it.

To this the noble Virgin answering, said to the angel: I am the lowly handmaid of the omnipotent God.

Consenting to thy word, O heavenly messenger, bearer of so great a secret, and desiring to see fulfilled what thou announces, I am ready to obey the decree of God.

The angel left her, and in that moment her virginal womb conceived the Word made flesh from hers.

This was his chosen enclosure for nine months: then he left it, and began the great combat, carrying the cross upon his shoulders. wherewith he struck the enemy who brought death into the world.

Oh dear Mother of Jesus, who did bring peace to angels and to men by giving birth to Christ,

Pray for us to this thy Son that he be merciful to us, and forgive us our sins, and give us his assistance, whereby, after this exile, we may possess the blessed joys of eternal life. Amen.

**Prayer from the Mozarabic Missal
(Second Sunday of Advent, Illatio)**

It is meet and just, truly right and available to salvation that we should extol the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ as one of the highest of God's wonderful works. A heavenly messenger announced that he would be born among men. A Virgin, dwelling on this earth, was saluted by the angel, and heard the great mystery. The Holy Ghost produced it in the Virgin's womb, when he came to her. So that thus, Gabriel announcing, Mary believing, and the Spirit co-operating with the Word of God, confidence followed the angelical salutation, and the promise was fulfilled by the reality that the Virgin should find herself to be made a mother, by the power of the Most High overshadowing her. Behold, said the angel, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a Son. How shall this be? answered Mary. But because she said it from faith, not from doubt, the Holy Ghost accomplished what the angel promised. Virgin before the conception, and Virgin after the birth of her Son, she had received her God in her soul, before possessing him in her womb. Virgin full of the grace of God, she was the first to receive the salvation of the world, and therefore was chosen to be the true Mother of the Son of God.