



# THE NATIONAL FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER - USA

## MINISTER'S MESSAGE

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### FROM LENT TO LIFE: A PROPOSED DAILY SPIRITUAL AGENDA

As we all hear in St. Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18) on each Ash Wednesday every year, the three great works of Lent are fasting (self-denial), almsgiving (self-giving) and prayer (self-surrender to God).

As you may have heard in Ash Wednesday or Lenten homilies, these three great Lenten works have some parallel to the three great Evangelical Counsels: fasting (self-denial) to chastity; almsgiving (self-giving) to poverty; and prayer (self-surrender) to obedience (to God).

These three, whether as Lenten works or Evangelical Counsels, serve to counter the three great evils, as depicted in 1 John 2:16, that the devil, the flesh and the world offer to entice our attention and our lives away from God:

“Carnal allurements, enticements for the eye and the life of empty show.”

Let us unpack these three evils to see how the Lenten works or Evangelical Counsels may counter them and thus offer us Secular Franciscans a daily spiritual agenda for the rest of our lives.

First, carnal allurements may indeed be, as reads one Bible translation, “sensual lust,” but that big word “concupiscence” could easily fit here. Carnal allurements may be any desires of our fallen human flesh for something or someone not conducive to our true good, Who is God.

Thus, any form of physical excess, like lust, gluttony or drunkenness, would be here. Any form of spiritual or physical release or laziness would be here. Letting ourselves go. Not being or doing all that we could be or should do. Also any fear of suffering or sacrifice for the glory of God and the good of our sisters and brothers could fit here as well. The focus in these

allurements, this concupiscence, is on “Me, Me, Me!” at the expense of love of God or love of neighbor.

And thus, easier said than done, we counter this “Me, Me, Me!” by self-denial, self-control, chastity, even celibacy for consecrated religious.

What is penance after all but a turning from self, from sin, to God? “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel,” as my local Bishop always says when dispensing ashes on Ash Wednesday (see Mark 1:15).

Fasting from chocolate or Facebook, if chocolate or Facebook offer temptations, for 40 days during Lent might be a step in this direction, but the greatest form of fasting would be a daily, not just Lenten, struggle to fast from all sin. That might seem impossible, and so it is without God’s great and daily grace, but surely the saints mastered sin most of the time, and aren’t we all striving to be saints?

This first great evil from the world, the devil and the flesh, which St. John calls “carnal allurements” or “sensual lust” may be resisted by daily, not just Lenten, thoughts, words and deeds of fasting, penance, self-denial and greater self-control. This resistance is surely strengthened by God’s grace obtained through the Sacraments and daily prayer. Most Catholics I know do try to practice these remedies during Lent. Why not consider practicing them every day?

Second, what evils and/or distractions might be found in “enticements for the eye”?

Well, here would be all the “bling,” the glitter, the gold, whatever or whomever money might seem able to obtain for us.

Although our big word “concupiscence” might also include greed, here is that greed for the spangles and baubles the world, the flesh or the devil might dangle before our eyes: any new material possessions when

what we already have is more than adequate OR when that money might be better given to those in our families or in our fraternities or in our Church or world who have much greater need than we do for the essentials of life.

Again, easier said than done, we combat this temptation by simplifying our lives, by conscious poverty, and if we have enough, by giving our money away! What we don't have won't burn any holes in our pockets, and here is the great beauty of almsgiving: we control the money; the money doesn't control us!

I read somewhere that the only money we take to heaven is the money we gave away to those most in need out of love for God and neighbor. We don't usually have to look far to find those in need. Many good charities exist to use our money to do good. Give ourselves away! Give our money away!

Enticements for the eyes are thus countered by daily, not just Lenten, thoughts, words and deeds of poverty, almsgiving, charity, self-giving. These thoughts, words and actions are strengthened by God's grace, by frequent reception of the Sacraments, particularly Holy Communion and Penance, and by daily prayer, especially in a form recommended by Holy Mother Church (see Secular Franciscan Rule #8).

Third and finally, what of "the life of empty show"? Well, here we can find the great sin of pride, the source of all other sins. Pride, Vanity, Vainglory, anything that, or anyone who, puffs us beyond being "holy and without blemish," which God intended for us before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Here would fall any manifestation of Power or Glory not directly deeded us by God, but rather "grasped" (Philippians 2:6) by us for selfish self-satisfaction or self-aggrandizement.

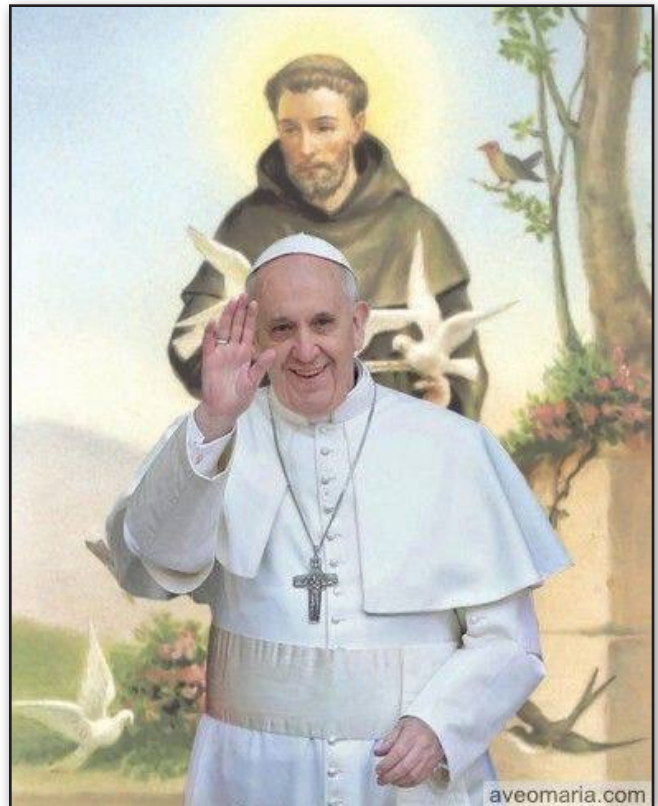
We combat this pretentious life, this life of empty show, this pride, this vanity, by prayer, by giving ourselves in humble obedience to God and Holy Mother Church every day in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, in praying daily the Liturgy of the Hours, by daily reading and praying Sacred Scriptures (lectio divina), by the daily sacrifice of the Rosary and/or the Divine Mercy Chaplet. We let go and we let God take over our lives. We pray without ceasing (see 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Again, most Catholics, most Secular Franciscans that I know, do try, during Lent, to deny themselves, to give of themselves and to pray more. That's great, but

surely we know that the struggle against sin, against the devil, the flesh and the world, is not just during Lent, but every day. The purpose of this article is for all of us to consider that what we give up, take on and pray during Lent can surely become a daily spiritual agenda for the rest of our lives!

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, Son and Holy Spirit, help us translate our Lenten Pences of self-denial (fasting), self-giving (almsgiving) and self-surrender (prayer) into a daily routine of penance and conversion (see Secular Franciscan Rule #7). After all, none of us may be tempted as directly as Christ was by the devil in the wilderness (see, for example, Matthew 4:1-11), but all of us are tempted, perhaps every day, by "carnal allurements, enticements for the eye and the life of empty show" (1 John 2:16). Help us by our Lenten Sacrifices translated into a daily spiritual agenda to stay ever close to Jesus Christ, our Risen Savior, through the example and prayers of Sts. Francis, Clare and all the Franciscan saints. May we never be defeated by sin. May we never give up in our struggles against the devil, the flesh and the world. We pray in Jesus' name.

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