February 18, 1945

Dear fellow countrymen and countrywomen, I greet you with the words: Praised be Jesus Christ!

With today’s date, we begin the season of Lent. In this holy time, every one of us should mortify ourselves a bit in what we eat and drink, but also hold back on some of the comfort things. This two-part type of lent sobers the soul, our moral health, and it even makes us healthier. In the first centuries, Christians fasted often and austerely. They fasted all day until evening; they put ashes on their heads, walked barefooted without decoration and at times wore hair-shirts. They ate only bread, berries and drank water. They kept away from meets and hot drinks. Lenten days were considered days of penitence, to be spent in prayer, attending devotions and in giving alms. Within the Polish nation, right from the beginning, Lenten discipline was observed in a more strict fashion than other nations. The poles restrained themselves from meat and dairy products. They deliberately, in addition to the fasts of the Church fasted on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays! They used oil sparely. At the time of Zygmunt Augustus, in the sixteenth century, a degree of laxity in lent was undertaken. The Kingly Court and nobility was influenced by German input. The nation however stayed faithful to the traditional lent. Maybe that's why Providence overflowed these beautiful Polish lakes with such an abundance of tasty karaśków, eels, herring, salmon, szczuków, carp, tench, sturgeon, pike, ślizów, patrągów, flakes, kiełbów, and flounder. These customs were brought to American by our Polish immigrants. I remember going to my family’s home and fasted. A few days before Ash Wednesday, our noble father went to town to buy Lenten provisions. You have to remember that we really had a large group of children. Dad was the sole provider for the upkeep of the family. He took me and a two wheel wagon. The shopping list consisted of 2 wheels of cheese; two large jars of jam; two kegs of herring; 4 sacks of flour, since we baked our own bread in a coal stove which was outside. From Ash Wednesday to Easter, with the exception of Sundays, - we didn’t even see meat. And so we lived through lent and grew strong. That’s the way it was years ago, yesterday!

 And so with these reminiscences, I write today’s talk:

**WHY MORTIFY SELF?**

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle reminds us in these words: “You are taught in the ways of Christ… in order that you put away the old and put on the new man who is created according to God. In each human being there is always a certain misunderstanding, which, some call the breaking of harmony between the flesh and the soul, others openly speak about the battle between the instinctual and the spiritual man. In the life of man there are two currents, a current of the corrupted human nature, and the current of God’s saving grace. They are contrary to one another and an enemy to each other. If the current is one of corrupted nature, then it not only dims the operation of God grace, but also erases the image of God and lowers him to the state of an animal. If he cooperates with God’s grace, then he becomes progressively better and more perfect and through that same operation of God becomes happier and more fulfilled. Now the question arises: What does man have to do to strengthen himself so that he does not give in to the spoiled current of human nature? He needs to seek this strength in prayer and discipline. Christ, our Savior, called out, “He who loves his own soul, loses it; who disdains it in this world, saves it for eternity.” In other words: who loves himself a bit much in matters of this world, - loses his soul for eternity. Who disciplines himself in things of this current life, builds a treasure in heaven. Whoever does not understand these words of Christ, namely, “If you wish to follow me, deny yourself take up your cross and follow me – Discipline enlightens the mind, calms the heart and strengthens the will. Human life, without discipline is play, a lie, and a sham. The man who does not know how to mortify himself or does not wish to do so is a moral cripple. There are two kinds of mortification: interior and exterior. Internal mortification is holding in check the mind, will, heart and imagination. External mortification holds his flesh, mind and imagination in check. Both of these mortifications are necessary not only in important and forbidden things, but also in permitted matters, in small and daily things. Man by nature is lazy to work and seeks comfort, and loves to pamper self. He forgets about his origin and the goal he is destined for. Often he is forgetful, that within his flesh, he carries an eternal soul. Who makes a little god out of his own flesh enslaves self and imprisons self, renounces God’s laws concerning self , stains his soul, wounds it, and at times eternally. God foresaw all of this when he gently but firmly stated: “If you will live according to the flesh, you will die, and if you discipline your flesh – you will live.”

 Therefore you need to mortify the flesh, in order not to wound the soul. You need to do W Księdze Wyjścia Starego Testament penance for your sins and transgressions in order to be worth of the name: “follower of Christ: - Someone once wrote: “To deal with the flesh is to deal with a sick human being, giving it everything in measure, resist harmful things, push them away and give it the W Księdze Wyjścia Starego Testament measure of sustenance, food and sleep, in order to operate well in this world, to be able to have the strength to work and pray and not reject mortification: - not to fear mortification in taste especially. St. Gregory had this to say: “People sin five ways in eating: they eat too often before regular meals or they use the tastiest items of choice which are not necessary for the state they are in, try to improve them, seek to eat exotic items, or live to eat instead of eating to live. Overdoing food or drink harms the soul and the flesh. Go to hospitals or insane asylums. Talk to your family doctor.

 A meditation on mortification would not be complete and sufficient without the mention of the mortification of the tongue. A sharp tongue is like a razor blade, slippery as a snake, which wounds the soul and poisons the peace and the happiness of others. The tongue, instead of praising God – blasphemes. Church writers like St. Augustine maintain that “the tongue is a wild animal wielding its sharp fangs against everything in sight,” or “a stove constantly in high heat whose sparks send for angry words.” Prudence, love and humility should always characterize our speech; then our speech will glorify God and build up our neighbor. Whoever mortifies in the use of his tongue, serves to be a paragon of Christian virtue and an apostle of goodness and peace. Honest people feel restraint before a venomous, reptilian tongue and do not respect the person that does not know how to control his tongue. God Himself says in the Old Testament: “Six things the Lord detests and the seventh his soul is repelled by”; and that seventh thing is : “false witness which lies and sows dilemmas between brothers.”

 He, who, from time to time thinks about death, he surely will admit the need for mortification. Everything on earth ends with death. Death is like the vulture which circles above a flock of birds and finds its sacrifice and speedily descents to grasp in its clutches a frightened and unprotected offering. Here drops a defenseless child, there, the head of a family. Once – a dearest person, there someone very talented. And in our wartimes, does not this death walk through prisons, concentration camps, through fields of battle? Does it not hover over cities and towns, above soldiers and civilians? Does it not sail the seas, and maneuver under the waters? To bring to mind death one does not have to run with the imagination beyond our borders; it is sufficient to enter our cities. There we will come across the cities of death. Cemeteries by cemeteries. Cross by cross, tombstone by tombstone. There lie those who yesterday were and yesterday still were living. There, they will place our bodies. For sure. The only factor is: when?

Death is a daily thing, threatening, a little bitter and somewhat ugly. It is however queen of silence, sober, majestic. Death breaks the connection between the flesh and the soul. The soul proceeds to the Savior and stands to be judged. Is it not more beneficial, then, to mortify oneself instead of pleasuring self? Does it not profit more to feed the soul more than the flesh? Someone wrote: “We dedicate an immensely greater amount of time and trouble to make sure our body is treated well; we care for, feed, dress, and further nurture our flesh to the harm of our souls. We need to rethink our lives. Death relieves us of our outer shell, the flesh which we pamper to the harm of our soles. You are young, large, and strong, you are beautiful and talented; think, and do not place all your hope in your youth or good looks; there have been those who were more beautiful and more talented and have been underground. Death, although old, because it is 6000 years old, is stronger than life. When cutting with a sharp scythe, the slim and the strong fall as the scythe swings. The scythe of death is very sharp and nothing stands before it. As the saying goes: There are more calves on the range than cows; there are more young in the cemetery than the old.”

 And you young and fruitful do not put hope beyond the beauty and fruitfulness of your body; the white flower of the berry bush drops, and they pick up the black berry. Diseases and death will destroy that healthy flesh changing it to a corps, a helpless corpse, cold, and ugly.

So why do you pamper and take such delight in this body, when what could happen in the near future is so ugly and disgusting and be excessively proud of it when it will end so terribly sadly. Reflect on death. Then you will understand the meaning and need of mortification.

 The people of the twentieth century are children of gold. Money, a fortune, plenty, and comfort became the one and only goal of human life. Who wants to think of mortification? Let the poor mortify themselves. Who is he that with his own abilities, cleverness and effort, although sometimes not morally, makes the pretense to everything that that money can buy? He drowns his intellect, heart and soul in satisfying all his yearnings and dwells in comfort, which always ends up in emptiness and glut. Death will take it all, all the treasure that he amassed. Everything was material, and if he spurned mortification, what kind of accounting will he give in front of his Creator and Judge. How beautifully someone put it when he wrote: “You will take not even a penny of your treasure when you go, what you diligently amassed, perhaps even with harm to your neighbor. You will take nothing from the soil you nurtured. You seeded it but another will take its yield. You planted an orchard and others will take its fruit as it happened throughout the generations. Today you sit in the shade underneath the trees, while the bones of your ancestors rest in the shadow of the cross in the cemetery.” Our forefathers during lent repeated these verses:

*“Your peace, - the earth; the grave, - your larder and wine store.*

*Your transportation – a bier, - your bed, - a board*

*A bug, - your companion, a seven yard cloth*

*A memory of a miserable world.*

*O dear world, who loses you*

*Will no pay for this for eternity.”*

Despite the fact that we do not want to acknowledge this, we have a heavy obligation on us to mortify ourselves in things of our lives, especially those which may corrupt our souls. The Creator told us to work and so we work. And so let us take note of these things in honest and sincere ways and educate ourselves in the way of mortification, remembering that everything that we call, “mine” or “ours” is in reality only a certain amount of time for our use, and not overuse. Human life is too short and has too much worth in order to waste it in empty effort and lack of thought. He who does not have this sober outlook on life is still a child. He hasn’t understood the words of God, - “By the sweat of your brow you shall earn the bread you eat.” The life of man on earth is a battle!.

The pagan philosophers well understood the worth and need of mortification. Perhaps the story of the Greek Diogenes is known by many. The story goes that he was asked by many in the Greek Forum: “what do you seek?” as he walked around with a candle. He answered peacefully “I walk and seek a person.” “Don’t you see that the forum is filled with people?” Response of the philosopher: “These are not people; they are animals; they live like animals.

St. Augustine writes, “Perhaps you will say that it is to hard a task to mortify self. On the other hand, look at the reward and you will see the worth of it. We see daily the work of shopper, farmers, and soldiers. Storms and the dangers of the sea do not dismay the mariner, rains and thunder do not scare the farmer, and wounds and death do not frighten the solder when he looks upon what the people think about him in his worthy task of protecting them and God’s promise.

The example of our Savior and Teacher ought to be for us an incentive to train ourselves in mortification. In the Book of Exodus we read of the following event: After escaping the hands of the Egyptian Pharaoh, they marched across the desert. Exhausted, they stood at the shores of the lake. It was of no benefit because the water was terrible to drink. Then Moses lifted up his hands to heaven and began to fervently pray. God showed him a tree, whose branches he was to throw into the water. Moses did as told. A miracle occurred. The water became sweet and cold, good for drinking. Through this branch, according to the doctors of the church we understand the symbolism as related to the wooden cross of Christ. When labor and mortification seem difficult, a burden, and unable to stomach, we are to bring to mind the cross and passion of Christ, his flagellation and crowning with thorns, the vinegar to drink, - and then the labor will be light and the mortification, sweet and pleasant. What thing can seem a suffering when the mind turns to the Passion of Christ, the Passion He sustained out of love for humanity.

Just as once God called to his people, similarly today he calls to us at the beginning of Lent: “Return to me with all your heart in fasting, prayer and sadness.” Already I hear the complaints and justification of those who claim that they cannot fast. Some excuse themselves because they work hard; some that they are weak in health. I can say this to those: fasting is needed to maintain health and is used to return to good health. I say this on the strength of various doctors who are not religious. When someone asked Hippocrates, the famous Greek doctor from pre-Christian times why he lived to such an old age, he responded: “I never rose from the table completely sated. He lived to the ripe old age of 140 years. In Sacred Scripture again we read the short sentence: “The sleep of the faith filled-man will last until the morning.

I quote St. Basil again: “Get it out of your head that you have to eat much to satisfy the needs of the flesh so that it stays healthy.” Don’t justify yourself before me but do it before God who knows what your excuses are. Even doctors prescribe eating less. If you can go along with doctors’ affirmation of fasting for good health, why is it that you do not want to do it according the Church’s advisement? What is better for the stomach: sleep easily through the night because you were measured in the amount of food you take in or loaded to the gills with food and toss and turn all night? Which boat can be saved: one which is heavily laden or one which carries a sparser load? More than one boat sank because of the large wave hit it and tipped it over? It goes for the body as well. When overfed, it is subject to a variety of diseases while measured eating shuns an attack from without.”

 St. Athanasius taught: “lent cures sickness, chases away evil spirits, drives away sinful thinking, enlightens the mind, cleans the heart, sanctifies the flesh and renders man worthy of sharing in heavenly rewards..

 The time of the holy lent ought to be a time of returning to the home of the heavenly father, and therefore a time for the proud and the haughty to gain some humility, for the miser to gain generosity, for the angry to soothe the emotional outbursts; for the drunkard to put aside the shot glass and the bottle; for the lazy to get to work, for the pleasure seekers to become men, because as a holy religious man said: “in God’s eyes, the fasting is not so much the question as is the rooting out of vices which the fasting enables” and “who is measured in his eating and drinking not regard lent as something avoidable. One of the most beautiful homilies of St. Bernard I found these notable ideas: “if you have failed in your moral posture, a good lent will be sufficient. If you failed with the palate why not fast for the failure in other organs of the body. Let the eye fast when guilty of immoral looks, let it atone. Let the ear fat, which willingly listened to gossip, plots, and shameful words. Let the tongue fast in its criticism and empty useless talk. Let the foot fast which walks evil ways. Let the soul stop the ill will and evil wishes. Without such a lent, the Lord discards the rest. During the period of lent let us attend devotions, say the Stations of the Cross, and sing the “Gorzkie Zale.” Drop into church for some prayer when coming home from work. St. Isadore says: “Lent is salvific then, when the flesh fasts and the soul prays. Prayer in Lent will penetrate the clouds.” Let us add to lent and prayer the mercy that some need from and who expect it from us in form of cooperation and aid. These I beg of you in the name of the orphans and elderly among us and in the lame of hungry children and hurting mothers on Polish lands. We will benefit immensely and profit in our salvation as the Lenten weeks progress.