



The Holy See

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HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Ash Wednesday , 21 February 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With the penitential procession we have entered into the austere climate of Lent and, beginning the Eucharistic celebration, we have just prayed to the Lord to help the Christian people "to begin the journey of true conversion in order to victoriously face, with the arms of penance, the battle against the spirit of evil" (cf. Collect).

In a short while, by receiving ashes on our head, we will hear once again a clear invitation to conversion which can be expressed with a double formula: "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel", or: "Remember, man, that you are dust and unto dust you will return".

Precisely due to the richness of the symbols and of the biblical and liturgical texts, Ash Wednesday is considered the "door" to Lent. In effect, today's liturgy and the gestures that mark it, together form, in anticipation and in a synthetic way, the very physiognomy of the entire period of Lent.

In her tradition, the Church does not limit herself to offering us liturgical and spiritual themes for the Lenten journey, but also points out to us ascetical instruments and practices to benefit from them.

"[R]eturn to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping and mourning". The First Reading opens with these words of the Prophet Joel (2: 12). The suffering and calamities that afflicted the land of Judah in that time impel the sacred author to encourage the Chosen People to conversion, to return, that is, with filial trust to the Lord, rending their hearts and not their garments.

The prophet recalls, in fact, that [God] "is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, rich in kindness and relenting in punishment" (2: 13). Joel's invitation, addressed to his listeners, also applies to us, dear brothers and sisters. Let us not hesitate to rediscover the friendship of God lost by sin; encountering the Lord, we experience the joy of his forgiveness.

And so, almost responding to the words of the Prophet, we have made our own the invocation of the Responsorial Psalm: "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned". Proclaiming Psalm 50, the great penitential Psalm, we appeal to divine mercy, we ask the Lord that by the power of his love he give us the joy of being saved.

With this spirit we begin the "acceptable time" of Lent, as St Paul reminds us in the Second Reading, to allow ourselves to be reconciled with God in Christ Jesus.

The Apostle introduces himself as an ambassador of Christ and clearly shows precisely how, in virtue of Christ, the sinner - that is each one of us - is offered the possibility of authentic reconciliation. "For our sakes God made him who did not know sin" he said, "to be sin, so that in him we might become the very holiness of God" (II Cor 5: 21).

Only Christ can transform every situation of sin into newness of grace. This is why the spiritual exhortation of Paul, addressed to the Christians of Corinth, has a strong impact: "We implore you in Christ's name: be reconciled to God"; and again: "Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" (5: 20; 6: 2).

While Joel spoke of the future day of the Lord as a day of terrible judgment, St Paul, referring to the words of the Prophet Isaiah, speaks of the "acceptable time", of the "day of salvation". The future day of the Lord has become the "today". The terrible day is transformed by the Cross and Resurrection of Christ into the day of salvation. And this day is now, as we have heard in the Gospel verse: "If today you hear the voice of the Lord, harden not your hearts". The call to conversion, to penance, resounds today with all its strength, so that its echo accompanies us in every moment of life.

The Ash Wednesday liturgy indicates the fundamental dimension of Lent in the conversion of the heart to God. This is the evocative message contained in the traditional Rite of Ashes, which we will renew shortly.

It is a rite with a double meaning: the first is related to interior change, to conversion and penance, while the second recalls the precarious human condition, as it is easy to understand from the two different formulas that accompany the gesture.

Here in Rome, the penitential procession of Ash Wednesday begins at the Church of Sant'Anselmo and concludes in this Basilica of Santa Sabina, where the first station of Lent takes

place.

In regard to this it is interesting to remember that the ancient Roman Liturgy, through the Lenten Stations, elaborated a singular geography of faith, starting from the idea that, with the arrival of the Apostles Peter and Paul and with the destruction of the Temple, Jerusalem was transferred to Rome.

Christian Rome was understood as a reconstruction of the Jerusalem of the time of Jesus within the walls of the City.

This new interior and spiritual geography, inherent in the tradition of the Lenten Station Churches, is not simply a memory of the past, nor an empty anticipation of the future; on the contrary, it intends to help the faithful along the interior journey, the journey of conversion and reconciliation, in order to reach the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem where God dwells.

Dear brothers and sisters, we have 40 days to deepen this extraordinary ascetical and spiritual experience. In the Gospel that has been proclaimed, Jesus indicates some of the useful instruments to accomplish an authentic interior and communitarian renewal: the works of charity (almsgiving), prayer and penance (fasting).

They are the three fundamental practices also dear to the Hebrew tradition, because they contribute to the purification of man before God (cf. Mt 6: 1-6, 16-18). Such exterior gestures, which are done to please God and not to obtain the approval and consensus of men, are acceptable to him if they express the determination of the heart to serve him with simplicity and generosity.

One of the Lenten Prefaces also reminds us of this with regards to fasting, as we read this singular expression: "*ieiunio... mentem elevas*: with fasting the spirit is raised" (Preface IV).

Fasting, to which the Church invites us in this particular season, certainly is not motivated by the physical or aesthetical order, but stems from the need that man has for an interior purification that detoxifies him from the pollution of sin and evil; it educates him to that healthy renunciation which releases the believer from the slavery to self; that renders him more attentive and open to listen to God and to be at the service of the brethren.

For this reason fasting and the other Lenten practices are considered the traditional Christian spiritual "arms" used to fight evil, unhealthy passions and vice. Concerning this, I would like to listen, together with you, to a brief comment of St John Chrysostom.

"As at the end of winter", he writes, "the summer season returns and the navigator launches his boat into the sea, the soldier polishes his arms and trains the horse for battle, the farmer sharpens

the scythe, the wayfarer strengthened, continues his journey, and the athlete sets aside his vestments and prepares for the race; so we too, at the start of this fast, like returning to a spiritual springtime, we polish the arms like the soldiers, we sharpen the scythe like the farmers, and as mariners we launch the boat of our spirit to confront the waves of senseless passions, like the wayfarer we continue the journey to heaven, and as the athlete we prepare ourselves for the fight by totally setting aside everything" (cf. *Homily to the People of Antioch*, n. 3).

In the [Message for Lent](#) I extended the invitation to live these 40 days of special grace as a "Eucharistic" time. Drawing from the inexhaustible font of love that the Eucharist is, in which Christ renews the redemptive sacrifice of the Cross, each Christian can persevere on the journey that we solemnly begin today.

The works of charity (almsgiving), prayer, fasting, together with every sincere effort of conversion, find their most lofty significance and value in the Eucharist, centre and culmination of the life of the Church and the history of salvation.

"May this Sacrament that we have received, O Father", we will pray at the end of Holy Mass, "sustain us on our Lenten way, make holy our fasting and render it efficacious to heal our spirit". We ask Mary to accompany us so that, at the end of Lent, we may contemplate the Risen Lord, interiorly renewed and reconciled with God and our brethren. Amen!

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