



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 8 March 2000

1. Lent is the culminating point of that journey of conversion and reconciliation which the Jubilee Year, a special time of grace and mercy, offers to all the faithful, so that they can renew their fidelity to Christ, man's only Saviour. So I wrote in my *Message for Lent 2000*, and with this conviction today, Ash Wednesday, we undertake the Lenten journey of penance. Today's liturgy invites us to pray that the heavenly Father will grant the Christian people to embark on the path of true conversion by fasting, so that with the arms of penance they may triumph in the struggle against the spirit of evil.

This is the message of the Great Jubilee, which becomes even more eloquent in Lent. The human person, every human person, is called to conversion and repentance, is spurred to friendship with God, in order to receive the gift of supernatural life which satisfies the deepest longings of his heart.

2. By receiving ashes on our head, we are reminded today that we are dust and to dust we will return. This thought, which is a human certainty, is not emphasized to make us passively resigned to our fate. On the contrary, while the liturgy stresses that we are mortal creatures, it reminds us of God's merciful initiative in wanting to give us a share in his own eternal and blessed life.

In the moving rite of giving ashes, believers hear an invitation not to be tied to material concerns which, however valuable, will eventually fade away. Instead, they must let themselves be transformed by the grace of conversion and repentance in order to scale the arduous yet gratifying heights of the supernatural life. Only in God does man fully find himself and discover the ultimate meaning of his life.

The Jubilee door is open to all! Let anyone enter who knows he is oppressed by guilt and poor in merit; let anyone enter who feels like dust that the wind scatters; let the weak and discouraged come to draw renewed strength from the Heart of Christ.

3. Today the distribution of ashes is accompanied by the traditional practice of fast and abstinence.

These are not mere external observances, ritual gestures, but eloquent signs of a necessary change of life. Fast and abstinence primarily strengthen the Christian for his struggle against evil and his service of the Gospel.

Penance and fasting call the believer to give up lawful material goods and satisfactions in order to gain greater interior freedom, enabling him to hear the Word of God and generously help his brothers and sisters in need.

Fast and abstinence, therefore, must be accompanied by acts of solidarity towards those who are suffering or going through difficult moments. Penance thus becomes a sharing with the marginalized and the needy. This too is the spirit of the Great Jubilee, which urges us all to show Christ's love in a practical way to our brothers and sisters who lack the necessities of life, who suffer hunger, violence or injustice. In this regard, I wrote in my Message for Lent: *"How can we ask for the grace of the Jubilee if we are insensitive to the needs of the poor; if we do not work to ensure that all have what is necessary to lead a decent life?"* (n. 5).

4. *"Repent, and believe in the Gospel"* (Mk 1: 15). Let us open our hearts to these words which we will hear many times during the Lenten season. May the journey of conversion and fidelity to the Gospel, which we are beginning today, enable us all to realize that we are children of one Father and reinvigorate the longing for Christian unity and harmony among peoples. I pray the Lord that in this Jubilee Lent every Christian will deeply sense his duty to be reconciled with God, with himself and with his brothers and sisters. This is the way to achieve the full communion of all Christ's disciples that we desire. May the time quickly come when, through the prayer and faithful witness of Christians, the world will acknowledge Jesus as the one Saviour and attain peace by believing in him.

May Mary most holy guide us on the first steps of our Lenten journey, so that we may all cross the threshold of the holy door of conversion and experience the grace of being transformed into the image of Christ.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I am happy to welcome all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims, especially those from Denmark and the United States. Praying that your visit will strengthen your faith and love, I invoke

upon you and your families the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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