



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION ON
ASH WEDNESDAY AT THE BASILIC OF ST SABINA

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Ash Wednesday, 12 February 1997

1. *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me”* (Ps 51 [50]:12).

In a certain sense, these words of the responsorial psalm contain the very heart of Lent and, at the same time, express its essential programme. The words are taken from the *Miserere*, the psalm in which the sinner opens his heart to God, confesses his guilt and implores forgiveness for his sins: “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you, against you only, have I sinned and done that which is evil in your sight.... Cast me not away from your presence and take not your holy Spirit from me” (ibid., 4-6; 13).

This psalm is an unusually effective liturgical commentary on the rite of Ashes. Ashes are a sign of man’s transience and subjection to death. In this season, when we are preparing to relive liturgically the mystery of the Redeemer’s death on the cross, we must more deeply *feel and experience our own mortality*. We are mortal beings, yet our death does not mean destruction and annihilation. In it, God has inscribed the profound hope of the new creation. Thus the sinner who celebrates Ash Wednesday can and must cry: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (ibid., 12).

2. In Lent, the certainty of this new creation springs from the light of Christ’s mystery: the mystery of his Passion, Death and Resurrection. In today’s liturgy St Paul says: “We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:20-21). Being willing to experience in his own flesh the drama of human death, Christ came to share in the destructibility

associated with man's temporal life. The Apostle speaks of this very clearly when he states: "He made him to be sin". This means that God treated Christ "who knew no sin" in the same way as a sinner, and this to our advantage. Indeed, Christ shares our human condition burdened by sin, so *that through him we might become the righteousness of God*.

Because of this faith in Christ we can cry together with the psalmist: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps 50:12). What use would be the imposition of ashes if they were not to shed light for us on the hope of the new life, the new creation, given to us by God in Christ?

3. The Church lives Christ's redemptive sacrifice throughout the liturgical year. However, in the season of Lent we would like to immerse ourselves in it in a particularly intense way, as the Apostle urges us: "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor 6:2). In this important season, the treasures of Redemption, merited for us by Christ crucified and risen, are dispensed to us in a most particular way. Thus the Psalmist's exclamation: "Create in me a clean heart ... and put a new and right spirit within me" becomes at the beginning of Lent a *strong call to conversion*.

With the words of the *Miserere* psalm, the sinner not only accuses himself of his own sins, but at the same time begins a new creative journey, the way of conversion: "Return to me with all your heart" (Jl 2:12), the prophet Joel says in the Lord's name in the first reading. "To be converted" thus means *to enter into deep intimacy with God*, as today's Gospel also proposes.

Authentic conversion implies doing all those works which belong to the Lenten season: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. However, these must not be performed only as an external fulfilment, but as the expression of an intimate encounter, to a certain extent unknown to men, with God himself. Conversion involves *a new discovery of God*. In conversion one experiences that in him resides the fullness of good, revealed in Christ's paschal mystery, and one draws from it abundantly in the inner abode of the heart.

God is waiting for this! God wants to create a pure heart in us and to renew within us a steadfast spirit. And at the beginning of this Lent, we want to open our souls to God's grace and to live intensely the journey of conversion towards Easter.