



The Holy See

LENTEN STATION PRESIDED OVER BY THE HOLY FATHER
IN THE BASILICA OF ST. SABINA ON THE AVENTINE HILL

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Ash Wednesday, 28 February 2001

1. *"Be reconciled to God.... Behold, now is the acceptable time"* (2 Cor 5: 20; 6: 2).

This is the invitation that the liturgy addresses to us at the beginning of Lent, urging us to be aware of the gift of salvation offered, in Christ, to everyone.

In speaking of the "acceptable time", the Apostle Paul refers to the "fullness of time" (cf. *Gal* 4: 4), that is, the time when God, through Jesus, "answered" and "helped" his people, completely fulfilling the promises of the prophets (cf. *Is* 49: 8). In Christ the time of mercy and pardon, the time of joy and salvation, is accomplished.

From the historical standpoint, the "acceptable time" is the time when the Gospel is proclaimed by the Church to people of every race and culture so that they will repent and open themselves to the gift of redemption. Life is then deeply transformed.

2. *"Behold, now is the acceptable time"*.

Lent, which begins today, is certainly an "acceptable time" in the liturgical year for receiving the grace of God with greater openness. Precisely for this reason it is called the "sacramental sign of our conversion" (*Opening Prayer, First Sunday of Lent, Italian Missal*): the sign and effective instrument of that radical change of life that calls for constant renewal in believers. The source of this extraordinary divine gift is the paschal mystery, the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ, the source of redemption for every person, for history and for the entire universe.

In a certain way the *imposition of ashes*, illustrated by the words that accompany it: "Repent, and

believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1: 15), refers to this mystery of suffering and love. Even the fast we observe today refers to this same mystery, so that we might begin a journey of true conversion in which union with the passion of Christ enables us to face and to win the struggle against the spirit of evil (cf. *Opening Prayer*, Ash Wednesday).

3. "*Behold, now is the acceptable time*".

With this in mind, we begin our Lenten journey, taking up the spirit of the Great Jubilee that marked an extraordinary *time of repentance and reconciliation* for the entire Church. It was a year of intense spiritual fervour, in which God's mercy was poured abundantly on the world. In order for this treasure of grace to continue spiritually enriching the Christian people, I offered concrete guidelines in the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* on how to begin this new phase in the Church's history.

Here I would like to recall several of those guidelines which are well suited to the special characteristics of Lent. First of all, *contemplation* of the face of the Lord: a face that appears in Lent as "a face of sorrow" (cf. nn. 25-27). In the liturgy, in the Lenten *Stationes* and in the devout practice of the *Via Crucis*, contemplative prayer prompts us to unite ourselves with the mystery of the One whom, though he knew no sin, God made to be sin for our sake (cf. 2 Cor 5: 21). In the school of the *saints*, every baptized person is called to follow Jesus more closely: as he was going up to Jerusalem and foresaw his passion, he confided to the disciples: "*I have a baptism to be baptized with*" (Lk 12: 50). The Lenten journey thus becomes for us a docile following of the Son of God, who became an obedient Servant.

4. The journey to which Lent invites us takes place above all in *prayer*. Christian communities must become authentic "schools of prayer" in these weeks. Another important objective is helping the faithful to approach the *sacrament of Reconciliation*, so that everyone may "rediscover Christ as *mysterium pietatis*, the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart and reconciles us fully with himself" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 37). Moreover, the experience of God's mercy cannot fail to inspire the commitment to *charity*, spurring the Christian community to "stake everything on charity" (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, IV). In the school of Christ, the community better understands the demanding preferential option for the poor, which is a "testimony to the nature of God's love, to his providence and mercy" (ibid.).

5. "*We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God*" (2 Cor 5: 20).

There is a growing need for reconciliation and forgiveness in today's world. I spoke of this recurring desire for forgiveness and reconciliation in the *Message* for this Lent. The Church, basing herself on the word of Christ, proclaims forgiveness and love for one's enemies. By doing so she "is conscious to inspire in the spiritual patrimony of all humanity a new way of relating to each other; a somewhat difficult way but rich in hope" (*Message*, n. 4). This is the gift she offers to

the people of our time.

"Be reconciled to God!": these words insistently echo in our spirit. Today - the liturgy tells us - is the "acceptable time" for our reconciliation with God. With this in mind, we will receive ashes and take the first steps of our Lenten journey. Let us generously continue on this road, keeping our eyes firmly set on Christ crucified. For the Cross is humanity's salvation: only by starting from the Cross is it possible to build a future of hope and peace for everyone.