



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, 13 February 2002

1. "*Rend your hearts and not your garments, return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and gracious*" (Jl 2,13).

With these words of the prophet Joel, the liturgy today leads us into Lent. The liturgy assures us that the *conversion of heart* is the basic feature of the wonderful time of grace that we begin to live. Likewise, it suggests the deep motivation that makes us capable of getting back on the path toward God: it is the renewed appreciation that *the Lord is merciful* and that every human being is a son whom He loves and calls to conversion.

With great richness of symbols, the prophetic text just proclaimed recalls that our spiritual motivation is to be made concrete in decisions and actions; that authentic conversion should not be reduced to external forms or vague intentions, but calls for us to involve and transform our entire existence.

The exhortation "return to the Lord your God" implies that we detach ourselves from what keeps us far from Him. Our being detached is the necessary starting place for re-establishing with God the covenant broken by sin.

2. "*We implore you in the name of Christ: be reconciled to God!*" (2 Cor 5,20). The pressing call to be reconciled with God is found in the passage of the second Letter to the Corinthians that we have just heard.

At the centre of the entire course of the Apostle's argument, the reference to Christ shows that in Him the sinner receives the possibility of an *authentic reconciliation*. Indeed, "*God made him who*

did not know sin to be sin so that in him we might become the justice of God" (2 Cor 5,21). Only Christ can transform a situation of sin into a situation of grace. Only he can create an *acceptable time* out of the time in which humanity is immersed in and swept away by sin, upset by divisions and hatred. "He is our peace, who has made both of us one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility ... to reconcile both with God in one body through the cross" (Eph 2,14-16).

This is the acceptable time! The time is offered today to us, who undertake with a penitent spirit the austere Lenten journey.

3. *"Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning"* (Jl 2,12). With the words of the prophet Joel, the liturgy of Ash Wednesday exhorts to conversion older persons, mature men and women, young people and children. *All have to ask pardon of the Lord* for ourselves and for others (cf. *ibid.*, 2,16-17).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, following the custom of the Lenten stations, we are gathered here *in the ancient Basilica of Santa Sabina*, to respond to that pressing appeal. We, like the contemporaries of the prophet, have before our eyes and imprinted on our minds the images of suffering and of immense tragedies, often the fruit of irresponsible egotism. We also feel the weight of the disarray of so many men and women in the face of the suffering of the innocent and the clashes of humanity today. We need the help of the Lord to recover our confidence and joy of living. We should return to Him, who opens for us the portal of his heart, rich in goodness and mercy.

4. Today, at the centre of our liturgical celebration, there is a *symbolic action*, interpreted by the words that are used with it. It is the *imposition of the ashes*, whose meaning, as a pointed reference to the human condition, is focused by the *first formula* offered by the rite: *"Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return"* (cf. Gen 3,19). These words taken from the Book of Genesis recall the fragility of our existence and invite us to consider the vanity of every earthly project for the human person who does not put his trust in the Lord. The *second formula* that the rite provides: *"Repent and believe in the Gospel"* (Mk 1,15) focuses on the indispensable condition for progress in the Christian life: one needs to make a true interior change and to accept with confidence the word of Christ.

Today's rite can be considered to be a "liturgy of death"; it refers to Good Friday, when our rite will be fully completed. It is in Him, who *"humbled himself making himself obedient unto death, even death on the Cross"* (Phil 2,8) that we should die to ourselves to be reborn to eternal life.

5. Let us listen to the call that the Lord directs to us through the intense and austere rites and prayers of the liturgy of Ash Wednesday. Let us accept the call with the humble and confident attitude of the Psalmist: *"Against you only have I sinned, and I have done what is evil in your sight"*. Again, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and steadfast spirit within"* (cf. Ps

50).

May the Lenten season be for all a renewed experience of conversion and of deep reconciliation with God, with ourselves and with our brothers and sisters. May Our Lady of Sorrows obtain it for us. In our Lenten journey we contemplate her associated with the suffering and redemptive passion of her Son.

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