



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 22 February 2012*

[\[Video\]](#)

Ash Wednesday

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In this Catechesis, I would like to reflect briefly upon the [season of Lent](#) which begins today with the Ash Wednesday Liturgy. It is a 40-day journey that will bring us to the Easter Triduum — the memorial of the Lord's Passion, death and Resurrection, the heart of the mystery of our salvation. In the first centuries of the Church's life this was the time when those who had heard and received the proclamation of Christ set out, step by step, on their journey of faith and conversion in order to receive the sacrament of Baptism. For the catechumens — namely, those who wished to become Christian and to be incorporated into Christ and into the Church — it was a matter of drawing closer to the living God and an initiation to faith which was to take place gradually, through inner transformation.

Subsequently, penitents and then all the faithful were also asked to make this journey of spiritual renewal and increasingly to conform their lives to Christ's. The participation of the whole community in the various stages of the Lenten journey emphasizes an important dimension of Christian spirituality: Christ's death and Resurrection does not bring the redemption of a few but of all. For this reason everyone, both those who were making a journey of faith as catechumens to receive Baptism and those who had drifted away from God and from the community of faith and were seeking reconciliation, as well as those who were living their faith in full communion with the

Church, knew that the season which precedes Easter is a time of *metanoia*; that is, of a change of heart, of repentance; it is the season that identifies our human life and the whole of history as a process of conversion that starts now, to encounter the Lord at the end of time.

Using an expression that has become characteristic in the liturgy, the Church calls the season we have entered today “*Quadragesima*”, namely, a 40-day period and, with a clear reference to Sacred Scripture, in this way introduces us into a precise spiritual context. In fact, 40 is the symbolic number with which both the Old and the New Testaments represent the salient moments in the experience of faith of the People of God.

It is a number that stands for the time of waiting, of purification, of the return to the Lord, of the knowledge that God keeps his promises. This number does not represent an exact chronological period, marked by the sum of its days. Rather, it suggests patient perseverance, a long trial, a sufficient length of time in which to perceive God’s works, a time within which one must resolve to assume one’s responsibilities with no further postponement. It is the time for mature decisions.

The number 40 first appears in the story of Noah. Because of the flood this righteous man spends 40 days and 40 nights in the Ark, with his family and with the animals that God had told him to take with him. And he waits another 40 days, after the flood, before touching dry land, saved from destruction (cf. Gen 7:4,12; 8:6).

Then, the next stage: Moses remains in the Lord’s presence on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights to receive the Law. He fasts throughout this period (cf. Ex 24:18). The journey of the Jewish people from Egypt to the Promised Land lasts for 40 years, an appropriate span of time to experience God’s faithfulness.

“You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness ... your clothing did not wear out upon you, and your foot did not swell, these forty years”, Moses says in Deuteronomy at the end of the 40 years’ migration (8:2, 4). The years of peace that Israel enjoys under the Judges are 40 (cf. 3:11, 30); but once this time has passed, forgetfulness of God’s gifts and the return to sin creep in.

The Prophet Elijah takes 40 days to reach Mount Horeb, the mountain where he encounters God (cf. 1 Kings 19:8). For 40 days the inhabitants of Ninevah do penance in order to obtain God’s forgiveness (cf. Jon 3:4). Forty is also the number of years of the reigns of Saul (cf. Acts 13:21), of David (cf. 2 Sam 5:4-5) and of Solomon (cf. 1 Kings 11:42), the first three kings of Israel.

The Psalms also reflect on the biblical significance of the 40 years; for example, Psalm 95[94], a passage of which we have just heard: “O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that

generation and said, ‘They are a people who err in heart, and they do not regard my ways’” (vv. 7c-10).

In the New Testament, before beginning his public ministry, Jesus withdraws into the wilderness for 40 days, neither eating nor drinking (cf. Mt 4:2); his nourishment is the Word of God, which he uses as a weapon to triumph over the devil. Jesus’ temptations recall those that the Jewish people faced in the desert, but which they were unable to overcome. It is for 40 days that the Risen Jesus instructs his disciples before ascending into Heaven and sending the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:3).

This recurring number of 40 describes a spiritual context which is still timely and applicable, and the Church, precisely by means of the days of the Lenten season, wishes to preserve their enduring value and show us their effectiveness. The purpose of the Christian liturgy of Lent is to encourage a journey of spiritual renewal in the light of this long biblical experience and, especially, to learn to imitate Jesus, who by spending 40 days in the wilderness taught how to overcome temptation with the word of God.

The 40 years that Israel spent wandering through the wilderness reveal ambivalent attitudes and situations. On the one hand they are the season of the first love with God and between God and his people, when he speaks to their hearts, continuously pointing out to them the path to follow. God had, as it were, made his dwelling place in Israel’s midst, he went before his people in a cloud or in a pillar of fire; he provided food for them every day by bringing down manna from heaven and making water flow from the rock. The years that Israel spent in the wilderness can thus be seen as the time of God’s predilection, the time when the People adhered to him: a time of first love.

On the other hand, the Bible also shows another image of Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness: the time of the greatest temptations and dangers too, when Israel mutters against its God and, feeling the need to worship a God who is closer and more tangible, would like to return to paganism and build its own idols. It is also the time of rebellion against the great and invisible God.

In Jesus’ earthly pilgrimage we are surprised to discover this ambivalence, a time of special closeness to God — a time of first love — and a time of temptation — the temptation to return to paganism, but of course without any compromise with sin. After his Baptism of penance in the Jordan, when he takes upon himself the destiny of the Servant of God who renounces himself, lives for others and puts himself among sinners to take the sin of the world upon himself, Jesus goes into the wilderness and remains there for 40 days in profound union with the Father, thereby repeating Israel’s history, with all those cadences of 40 days or years which I have mentioned. This dynamic is a constant in the earthly life of Jesus, who always seeks moments of solitude in order to pray to his Father and to remain in intimate communion, in intimate solitude with him, in an exclusive communion with him, and then to return to the people. However in this period of “wilderness” and of his special encounter with the Father, Jesus is exposed to danger and is assaulted by the temptation and seduction of the Evil One, who proposes a different messianic

path to him, far from God's plan because it passes through power, success and domination rather than the total gift of himself on the Cross. This is the alternative: a messianism of power, of success, or a messianism of love, of the gift of self.

This situation of ambivalence also describes the condition of the Church journeying through the "wilderness" of the world and of history. In this "desert" we believers certainly have the opportunity for a profound experience of God who strengthens the spirit, confirms faith, nourishes hope and awakens charity; an experience that enables us to share in Christ's victory over sin and death through his sacrifice of love on the Cross. However the "wilderness" is also a negative aspect of the reality that surrounds us: aridity, the poverty of words of life and of values, secularism and cultural materialism, which shut people into the worldly horizons of existence, removing them from all reference to transcendence.

This is also the environment in which the sky above us is dark, because it is covered with the clouds of selfishness, misunderstanding and deceit. In spite of this, for the Church today the time spent in the wilderness may be turned into a time of grace, for we have the certainty that God can make the living water that quenches thirst and brings refreshment gush from even the hardest rock.

Dear brothers and sisters, in these 40 days that will bring us to the Resurrection at Easter, we can find fresh courage for accepting with patience and faith every situation of difficulty, affliction and trial in the knowledge that from the darkness the Lord will cause a new day to dawn. And if we are faithful to Jesus, following him on the Way of the Cross, the clear world of God, the world of light, truth and joy will be, as it were, restored to us. It will be the new dawn, created by God himself. A good Lenten journey to you all!

To special groups:

I greet all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Belgium, Norway, Canada and the United States. I offer a special welcome to the faithful of the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham on the occasion of their pilgrimage to the See of Peter. I greet the pilgrim group from the Diocese of Antwerp, and I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. With prayerful good wishes for a spiritually fruitful Lent, I invoke upon all of you God's abundant blessings!

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Lent is a favourable time for intensifying your spiritual life; may the practice of fasting help you, dear *young people*, to acquire ever greater self-control. May prayer be for you, dear *sick people*, the way to entrust your sufferings to God and to feel him always close to you; lastly, may works of mercy help you, dear *newlyweds*, while living your married life, to open it to the needs of your brothers and sisters. A

good Lent to you all!

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