



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, 17 March 1999

1. *"Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful..."* (Jl 2:13).

With this exhortation taken from the book of the prophet Joel, the Church begins her Lenten pilgrimage, the acceptable time for returning: for returning to God from whom we have turned away. This, in fact, is the meaning of the penitential journey which starts today, Ash Wednesday: to return to the Father's house, bearing in our hearts the confession of our own guilt. The psalmist invites us to say over and over: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions" (Ps 50 [51]:1). With these sentiments, each of us sets out on the Lenten path, in the conviction that God the Father, who "sees in secret" (Mt 6: 4, 6, 18), goes out to meet the repentant sinner as he returns. As in the parable of the prodigal son, he embraces him and lets him understand that, by returning home, he has regained his dignity as a son: "he was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Lk 15: 24).

In this year particularly dedicated to God the Father, Lent becomes even more important as an acceptable time for making an authentic journey of conversion, so that we may return with repentant hearts to the Father of all, who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Jl 2: 13).

2. The very ancient and moving rite of ashes today opens this penitential journey. While putting ashes on the heads of the faithful, the celebrant warns each of them: *"Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return!"* (cf. Gn 3:19).

These words also refer to a "return": the return to dust. They allude to the *necessity of death* and invite us not to forget that we are merely passing through this world.

At the same time, however, the expressive image of dust calls to mind the truth about creation with an allusion to the richness of the cosmic dimension of which the human creature forms a part. Lent recalls the work of salvation, to make man aware of the fact that death, a reality he must constantly face, is nevertheless not a *primordial truth*. Actually, it did not exist at the beginning, but, as the sad consequence of sin, it "entered the world through the devil's envy" (Wis 2:24), becoming the common inheritance of human beings.

More than to other creatures, the words: "*Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return!*" are addressed to man, created by God in his own image and placed at the centre of the universe. In reminding him that he must die, God does not abandon the initial plan, but rather confirms it and re-establishes it in an extraordinary way after the rupture caused by original sin. This confirmation came to pass in Christ, who freely assumed the burden of sin and willingly submitted to death. The world thus became the scene of his saving passion and death. This is the paschal mystery, to which the season of Lent directs us in a most special way.

3. "*Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return!*".

Human death was defeated by the death of Christ. If, then, the Lenten season directs us to relive the tragic events on Golgotha, it does so always and exclusively to prepare us to be later immersed in the fulfilment of the paschal event, that is, in the bright joy of the *resurrection*.

This is how we should understand the other exhortation that the Church addresses to the faithful during the distribution of ashes: "*Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel*" (Mk 1: 15). What does it really mean to "be faithful to the Gospel", if not to accept the truth of the resurrection with all it entails? From the very first day of Lent, therefore, we enter into this saving horizon, exclaiming with the psalmist: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.... O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth your praise" (Ps 50 [51]:10, 15).

4. Lent is a time of intense prayer and extended praise; it is a time of penance and fasting. But along with prayer and fasting, the liturgy invites us to fill our day with *works of charity*. This is the worship pleasing to God! As I had occasion to recall in my Lenten Message, this is a fitting time for us to think of the too many who, like Lazarus, wait to collect a few crumbs that fall from the tables of the rich (cf. n. 4). The image before us is one of a banquet, the symbol of the heavenly Father's gracious providence towards all men and women (cf. n. 1). Everyone must be able to partake of it. For this reason, the Lenten practices of fasting and almsgiving not only express personal asceticism, but also have an important social and community function: they recall the need to "convert" the model of development to a more just distribution of goods, so that everyone can live in dignity and, at the same time, creation itself may be protected.

All this, however, begins with a profound change of mentality and, more radically, with a conversion of heart. How urgent and timely, then, is this prayer: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me". Yes, O Father, create in us a clean heart; put a new and right spirit within us; "protect us in our struggle against evil ... make this day holy by our self-denial" (*Opening Prayer*).

Amen!

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