



The Holy See

"STATIO" AND PENITENTIAL PROCESSION FROM THE CHURCH OF ST ANSELM
TO THE BASILICA OF ST SABINA ON THE AVENTINE HILL
HOLY MASS, BLESSING AND IMPOSITION OF THE ASHES

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Basilica of St Sabina

Ash Wednesday , 25 February 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, Ash Wednesday a liturgical door opening onto Lent the texts chosen for the celebration sketch the entire structure of the Lenten Season, if only in outline. The Church takes care to indicate to us the necessary spiritual orientation, and she provides us with divine assistance to decisively and courageously make the special spiritual journey we are now beginning, already illuminated by the brilliance of the Paschal Mystery.

"Return to me with all your heart". The appeal for conversion emerges as a dominant theme in every component of today's liturgy. Already in the Entrance Antiphon, it states that the Lord overlooks and forgives the sins of those who repent; in the Collect, Christian people are invited to pray so that each one may undertake a "journey of true conversion". In the First Reading, the Prophet Joel urges us to return to the Father "with your whole heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.... For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment" (2: 12-13). God's promise is clear: if the people will listen to the invitation to conversion, God will make his mercy triumph and his friends will be showered with countless favours. With the Responsorial Psalm, the liturgical assembly makes the invocations of Psalm 51[50] its own, asking the Lord to create within us "a clean heart" and to renew in us "a right spirit". Next is the Gospel passage in which Jesus warns us against the canker of vanity that leads to ostentation and hypocrisy, to superficiality and self-satisfaction, and reasserts the need to foster uprightness of heart. At the same time he shows us the means to grow in this purity of intention: by cultivating intimacy with the heavenly Father.

Particularly welcome in this Jubilee Year, commemorating the 2,000th anniversary of St Paul's birth, the words of the Second Letter to the Corinthians reach us: "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (5: 20). The Apostle's invitation rings out as a further encouragement to take the Lenten call to conversion seriously. Paul experienced in an extraordinary way the power of God's grace, the grace of the Paschal Mystery which gives life to Lent itself. He presents himself to us as an "ambassador" of the Lord. Who better than he, therefore, can help us to progress productively on this journey of inner conversion? In the First Letter to Timothy he writes: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but", he adds, "I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life" (1: 15-16). Thus, the Apostle is aware that he has been chosen as an example, and this exemplarity of his concerns precisely conversion, the transformation of his life that was brought about by God's merciful love. "I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him", he recognizes, "but I received mercy... and the grace of our Lord overflowed" (*ibid.*, 1: 13-14). All of his preaching and even more his entire missionary existence was sustained by an inner urge that can be traced back to the fundamental experience of "grace". "By the grace of God I am what I am", he writes to the Corinthians, "...I worked harder than any of them [the Apostles], though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me" (1 Cor 15: 10). It is a question of an awareness that surfaces in all his writings and that served as an inner "lever" with which God could propel him onwards, toward ever further boundaries, not only geographical but also spiritual.

St Paul recognizes that everything in him is the work of divine grace but he does not forget that it is necessary to adhere freely to the gift of new life received in Baptism. In the text of chapter six of his Letter to the Romans, which will be proclaimed during the Easter Vigil, he writes: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness" (6: 12-13).

Contained in these words we find the entire programme of Lent, in accordance with its intrinsic baptismal perspective. On one hand they affirm the victory of Christ over sin, which happened once and for all with his death and Resurrection. On the other, we are urged not to yield our bodies to sin, that is, not to allow sin any room, so to speak, to take its revenge. The victory of Christ expects the disciple to make it his own and this happens first of all with Baptism, through which, united with Jesus, we became "living, returned from the dead". The baptized person, however, in order that Christ may fully reign within him, must faithfully follow his teachings; he must never lower his gaze so as not to let the adversary gain ground in any way.

But how can the baptismal vocation be brought to fulfilment so as to be victorious in the struggle between the flesh and the spirit, between good and evil, a combat that marks our existence? In the Gospel passage today the Lord indicates to us three useful means: prayer, almsgiving and fasting. We also find useful references to this in St Paul's experience and writings. Concerning *prayer* he urges us to be "constant", and to be "watchful in it with thanksgiving" (Rm 12: 12; Col 4: 2), to

"pray constantly" (1 Thes 5: 17). Jesus is in the depths of our hearts. He makes himself present and his presence will remain, even if we speak and act in accordance with our professional duties. For this reason, in prayer there is within our hearts an inner presence of relationship with God, which gradually becomes also an explicit prayer. With regard to *almsgiving* the passages on the great collection for the poor brethren are certainly important (cf. 11 Cor 8 and 9) but it should be noted that for St Paul, love is the apex of the believer's life, "the bond of perfection"; "and above all these", he writes to the Colossians, "put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3: 14). He does not speak specifically of *fasting* but urges people frequently to have moderation, as a characteristic of those who are called to live in watchful expectation of the Lord (cf. 1 Thes 5: 6-8; Ti 2: 12). His reference to that spiritual "competitiveness" which calls for sobriety is also interesting: "Every athlete", he writes to the Corinthians, "exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable" (1 Cor 9: 25). The Christian must be disciplined in order to discover the way and truly reach the Lord.

This, then, is the vocation of Christians: risen with Christ they have passed through death and their life is henceforth hidden with Christ in God (cf. Col 3: 1-2). To live this "new" existence in God it is indispensable to be nourished with the word of God. Only in this way can we truly be united with God and live in his presence if we are in dialogue with him. Jesus says so clearly when he responds to the first of the three temptations in the desert, citing Deuteronomy: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4: 4; cf. Dt 8: 3). St Paul advises: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Col 3: 16). In this too, the Apostle is primarily a witness. His Letters are eloquent proof that he lived in constant dialogue with the word of God. His thought, action, prayer, theology, preaching and exhortation: everything in him was the fruit of the word, received in the Jewish faith from his youth and fully revealed to his eyes by his encounter with the dead and Risen Christ, which he preached for the rest of his life during his missionary "race". It was revealed to St Paul that in Jesus Christ God had pronounced his definitive Word, himself, a Word of salvation that coincided with the Paschal Mystery the gift of himself on the Cross which then became Resurrection, because love is stronger than death. Thus, St Paul could conclude: "Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6: 14). In Paul the Word became life and his one boast is the Crucified and Risen Christ.

Dear brothers and sisters, while we prepare to receive Ashes on our heads as a sign of conversion and repentance, let us open our hearts to the vivifying action of the word of God. May Lent, marked by more frequent listening to this word, by more intense prayer, by an austere and penitential lifestyle, be an incentive to conversion and to sincere love towards our brothers, especially those who are poorest and neediest. May the Apostle Paul accompany us; may Mary, the attentive Virgin of listening and the humble Handmaid of the Lord guide us. Thus spiritually renewed, we shall succeed in celebrating Easter joyfully. Amen!

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