



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 , 6 February 2008*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

If Advent is the season *par excellence* that invites us to hope in the God-Who-Comes, Lent renews in us the hope in the One who made us pass from death to life. Both are seasons of purification - this is also indicated by the liturgical colour that they have in common - but in a special way Lent, fully oriented to the mystery of Redemption, is defined the "path of true conversion" (cf. Collect). At the beginning of our penitential journey, I would like to pause briefly to reflect on prayer and suffering as qualifying aspects of the liturgical Season of Lent, whereas I dedicated the Message for Lent, published last week, to the practice of almsgiving. In the Encyclical Spe Salvi, I identified prayer and suffering, together with action and judgement, as "'settings' for learning and practising hope". We can thus affirm that precisely because the Lenten Season is an invitation to prayer, penance and fasting, it affords a providential opportunity to enliven and strengthen our hope.

Prayer nourishes hope because nothing expresses the reality of God in our life better than praying with faith. Even in the loneliness of the most severe trial, nothing and no one can prevent me from addressing the Father "in the secret" of my heart, where he alone "sees", as Jesus says in the Gospel (cf. Mt 6: 4, 6, 18). Two moments of Jesus' earthly existence come to mind. One is at the beginning and the other almost at the end of his public ministry: the 40 days in the desert, on

which the Season of Lent is based, and the agony in Gethsemane - are both essentially moments of prayer. Prayer alone with the Father face to face in the desert; prayer filled with "mortal anguish" in the Garden of Olives. Yet in both these circumstances it is by praying that Christ unmasks the wiles of the tempter and defeats him. Thus, prayer proves to be the first and principal "weapon" with which to win the victory "in our struggle against the spirit of evil" (cf. Collect).

Christ's prayer reaches its culmination on the Cross. It is expressed in those last words which the Evangelists have recorded. Where he seems to utter a cry of despair: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27: 46; Mk 15: 34; cf. Ps 22[21]: 1), Christ was actually making his own the invocation of someone beset by enemies with no escape, who has no one other than God to turn to and, over and above any human possibilities, experiences his grace and salvation. With these words of the Psalm, first of a man who is suffering, then of the People of God in their suffering, caused by God's apparent absence, Jesus made his own this cry of humanity that suffers from God's apparent absence, and carried this cry to the Father's heart. So, by praying in this ultimate solitude together with the whole of humanity, he opens the Heart of God to us. There is no contradiction between these words in Psalm 22[21] and the words full of filial trust: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23: 46; cf. Ps 31[30]: 5). These words, also taken from Psalm 31[30], are the dramatic imploration of a person who, abandoned by all, is sure he can entrust himself to God. The prayer of supplication full of hope is consequently the *leitmotif* of Lent and enables us to experience God as the only anchor of salvation. Indeed when it is collective, the prayer of the People of God is a voice of one heart and soul, it is a "heart to heart" dialogue, like Queen Esther's moving plea when her people were about to be exterminated: "O my Lord, you only are our King; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you" (Est 14: 3)... for a great danger overshadows me (cf. v. 7). In the face of a "great danger" greater hope is needed: only the hope that can count on God.

Prayer is a crucible in which our expectations and aspirations are exposed to the light of God's Word, immersed in dialogue with the One who is the Truth, and from which they emerge free from hidden lies and compromises with various forms of selfishness (cf. *Spe Salvi*, n. 33). Without the dimension of prayer, the human "I" ends by withdrawing into himself, and the conscience, which should be an echo of God's voice, risks being reduced to a mirror of the self, so that the inner conversation becomes a monologue, giving rise to self-justifications by the thousands. Therefore, prayer is a guarantee of openness to others: whoever frees himself for God and his needs simultaneously opens himself to the other, to the brother or sister who knocks at the door of his heart and asks to be heard, asks for attention, forgiveness, at times correction, but always in fraternal charity. True prayer is never self-centred, it is always centred on the other. As such, it opens the person praying to the "ecstasy" of charity, to the capacity to go out of oneself to draw close to the other in humble, neighbourly service. True prayer is the driving force of the world since it keeps it open to God. For this reason without prayer there is no hope but only illusion. In fact, it is not God's presence that alienates man but his absence: without the true God, Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, illusory hopes become an invitation to escape from reality. Speaking with

God, dwelling in his presence, letting oneself be illuminated and purified by his Word introduces us, instead, into the heart of reality, into the very motor of becoming cosmic; it introduces us, so to speak, to the beating heart of the universe.

In a harmonious connection with prayer, fasting and almsgiving can also be considered occasions for learning and practising Christian hope. The Fathers and ancient writers liked to emphasize that these three dimensions of Gospel life are inseparable, reciprocally enrich each other and bear more fruit the more they collaborate with each other. Lent as a whole, thanks to the joint action of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, forms Christians to be men and women of hope after the example of the Saints.

I would now like to pause briefly on the aspect of suffering since, as I wrote in the Encyclical *Spe Salvi*: "The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society" (n. 38). Easter, to which Lent is oriented, is the mystery which gives meaning to human suffering, based on the superabundant com-*passion* of God, brought about in Jesus Christ. The Lenten journey therefore, since it is wholly steeped in Easter light, makes us relive what happened in Christ's divine and human Heart while he was going up to Jerusalem for the last time to offer himself in expiation (cf. Is 53: 10). Suffering and death fell like darkness as he gradually came nearer to the Cross, but the flame of love shone brighter. Indeed, Christ's suffering was penetrated by the light of love (cf. *Spe Salvi*, n. 38).

It was the Father's love that permitted the Son to confidently face his last "baptism", which he himself defines as the apex of his mission (cf. Lk 12: 50). Jesus received that baptism of sorrow and love for us, for all of humanity. He has suffered for truth and justice, bringing the Gospel of suffering to human history, which is the other aspect of the Gospel of love. God cannot suffer, but he can and wants to be com-*passionate*. Through Christ's passion he can bring his *con-solatio* to every human suffering, "the consolation of God's compassionate love - and so the star of hope rises" (*Spe Salvi*, n. 39).

As for prayer, so for suffering: the history of the Church is very rich in witnesses who spent themselves for others without reserve, at the cost of harsh suffering. The greater the hope that enlivens us, the greater is the ability within us to suffer for the love of truth and good, joyfully offering up the minor and major daily hardships and inserting them into Christ's great com-*passion* (cf. *ibid.*, n. 40). May Mary, who, together with that of her Son, had her immaculate Heart pierced by the sword of sorrow, help us on this journey of evangelical perfection. In these very days, while commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Apparitions of Our Lady at Lourdes we are prompted to meditate on the mystery of Mary's sharing in humanity's suffering; at the same time, we are encouraged to draw consolation from the Church's "treasury of compassion" (*ibid.*) to which she contributed more than any other creature. Therefore, let us begin Lent in spiritual union with Mary who "advanced in her pilgrimage of faith" following her Son (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 58) and always goes before the disciples on the journey towards the light of Easter. Amen!

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