



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Ash Wednesday, 1st March 2006

On the road!

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, with the Ash Wednesday Liturgy, the Lenten journey of 40 days begins that will lead us to the Easter Triduum, the memorial of the passion, death and Resurrection of the Lord, heart of the mystery of our salvation. It is a favourable time when the Church invites Christians to have a keener awareness of the redeeming work of Christ and to live their Baptism in greater depth.

Indeed, in this liturgical season, the People of God from the earliest times have drawn abundant nourishment from the Word of God to strengthen their faith, reviewing the entire history of creation and redemption.

With its 40-day duration, Lent has an indisputably evocative power. Indeed, it intends to recall some of the events that marked the life and history of ancient Israel, presenting its paradigmatic value anew also to us.

We think, for example, of the 40 days of the great flood that led to God's Covenant with Noah, and hence, with humanity, and of the 40 days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai, after which he was given the Tables of the Law.

The Lenten period is meant to serve as an invitation to relive with Jesus the 40 days he spent in the desert, praying and fasting, in preparation for his public mission.

Today, we too, together with all the world's Christians, are spiritually setting out towards Calvary on a journey of reflection and prayer, meditating on the central mysteries of the faith. We will thus

prepare ourselves to experience, after the mystery of the Cross, the joy of Easter.

Today, an austere and symbolic gesture is being made in all parish communities: *the imposition of ashes*, and this rite is accompanied by two formulas, full of meaning, that are a pressing appeal to recognize that we are sinners and to return to God.

The first formula says: *"Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you will return"* (cf. Gn 3: 19). These words of the Book of Genesis call to mind the human condition placed under the sign of transience and limitation, and are meant to spur us once again to place our every hope in God alone.

The second formula refers to the words that Jesus spoke at the beginning of his itinerant ministry: *"Repent, and believe in the Gospel"* (Mk 1: 15). This is an invitation to base our personal and community renewal on a firm and trusting attachment to the Gospel.

The Christian's life is a life of faith, founded on the Word of God and nourished by it. In the trials of life and in every temptation, the secret of victory lies in listening to the Word of truth and rejecting with determination falsehood and evil.

This is the true and central programme of the Lenten Season: to listen to the word of truth, to live, speak and do what is true, to refuse falsehood that poisons humanity and is the vehicle of all evils. It is therefore urgently necessary in these 40 days to listen anew to the Gospel, the Word of the Lord, the word of truth, so that in every Christian, in every one of us, the understanding of the truth given to him, given to us, may be strengthened, so that we may live it and witness to it.

Lent encourages us to let the Word of God penetrate our life and thus to know the fundamental truth: who we are, where we come from, where we must go, what road to take in life. And thus, the Season of Lent offers us an ascetic and liturgical route which, while helping us to open our eyes to our weakness, opens our hearts to the merciful love of Christ.

The Lenten journey, by bringing us close to God, enables us to look upon our brethren and their needs with new eyes. Those who begin to recognize God, to look at the face of Christ, also see their brother with other eyes, discover their brother, what is good for him, what is bad for him, his needs.

Lent, therefore, as a time of listening to the truth, is a favourable moment to convert to love, because the deep truth, the truth of God, is at the same time love.

By converting to the truth of God, we must necessarily be converted to love; a love that knows how to make its own the Lord's attitude of compassion and mercy, as I wanted to recall in the *Message for Lent*, whose theme consists of the Gospel words: *"Jesus, at the sight of the crowds,*

was moved with pity" (Mt 9: 36).

Aware of her mission in the world, the Church never ceases to proclaim the merciful love of Christ, who continues to turn his compassionate gaze upon the people and peoples of every time. "*In the face of the terrible challenge of poverty afflicting so much of the world's population*", I wrote in the above-mentioned Message for Lent, "*indifference and self-centred isolation stand in stark contrast to the 'gaze' of Christ. Fasting and almsgiving, which, together with prayer, the Church proposes in a special way during the Lenten Season, are suitable means for us to become conformed to this 'gaze'*" (*L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 8 February 2006, p. 7), to the gaze of Christ, and to see ourselves, humanity, others, with his gaze.

In this spirit, let us enter the austere and prayerful atmosphere of Lent, which is truly an atmosphere of love for our brethren.

May these be days of reflection and of intense prayer, in which we let ourselves be guided by the Word of God, which the liturgy offers to us in abundance. May Lent also be a time of fasting, penance and watchfulness of ourselves, and may we be convinced that the fight against sin is never-ending, because temptation is a daily reality and we all experience fragility and delusion.

Lastly, through almsgiving and doing good to others, may Lent be an opportunity for sincere sharing with our brethren of the gifts that we have received, and of attention to the needs of the poorest and most abandoned people.

On this penitential journey, may we be accompanied by Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, who is a teacher of listening and of faithful adherence to God. May the Virgin Most Holy help us to arrive purified and renewed in mind and in spirit, to celebrate the great mystery of Christ's Pasch. With these sentiments, I wish you all a good and productive Lent.

To special groups:

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including groups from Denmark, Japan, Pakistan and the United States of America. In particular, I greet the delegation of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders from America and also the many students present at this Audience. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace.

I address a cordial welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular, I greet those taking part in the Plenary Meeting of the *Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences*, accompanied by Mons. Walter Brandmüller. Dear friends, thank you for your service to the Holy See in the international

field of historical studies; continue on your way as researchers in a spirit of fidelity to the Church and to historical truth.

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. May the Lenten Season that is beginning today lead each one of you to a more intimate knowledge of Christ, so that in your different situations you may have his same sentiments and do everything in communion with him.

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