



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 9 March 2011*

[\[Video\]](#)

Ash Wednesday

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On this day, marked by the austere symbol of ashes, we enter the Season of Lent, beginning a spiritual journey that prepares us for celebrating worthily the Easter Mysteries. The blessed ashes imposed upon our forehead are a sign that reminds us of our condition as creatures, that invites us to repent, and to intensify our commitment to convert, to follow the Lord ever more closely.

Lent is a journey, it means accompanying Jesus who goes up to Jerusalem, the place of the fulfilment of his mystery of Passion, death and Resurrection; it reminds us that Christian life is a “way” to take, not so much consistent with a law to observe as with the very Person of Christ, to encounter, to welcome, to follow.

Indeed, Jesus says to us: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). In other words he tells us that in order to attain, with him, the light and joy of the Resurrection, the victory of life, of love and of goodness, we too must take up our daily cross, as a beautiful passage from the *Imitation of Christ* urges us: “Take up your cross, therefore, and follow Jesus, and you shall enter eternal life. He himself opened the way before you in carrying his Cross (Jn 19:17), and upon it he died for you, that you too, might take up your cross and long to die upon it. If you die with him, you shall also live with him, and if you share his

suffering, you shall also share his glory” (Book 2, chapter 12, n. 2).

In Holy Mass of the First Sunday of Lent we shall pray: “Father, through our observance of Lent, sign of the sacrament of our conversion, help us to understand the meaning of your Son’s death and Resurrection, and teach us to reflect it in our lives” (*Opening Prayer*).

This is an invocation that we address to God because we know that he alone can convert our hearts. And it is above all in the Liturgy, by participating in the holy mysteries, that we are led to make this journey with the Lord; it means learning at the school of Jesus, reviewing the events that brought salvation to us but not as a mere commemoration, a remembrance of past events. In the liturgical actions Christ makes himself present through the power of the Holy Spirit and these saving events become real.

There is a keyword that recurs frequently in the Liturgy to indicate this: the word “today”; and it should be understood in its original and practical, rather than metaphorical, sense. *Today* God reveals his law and we are granted to choose *today* between good and evil, between life and death (*cf.* Dt 30:19). *Today* “the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15). *Today* Christ died on Calvary and rose from the dead; he ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father; *today* the Holy Spirit is given to us; *today* is a favourable time.

Taking part in the Liturgy thus means immersing our life in the mystery of Christ, in his enduring presence so as to follow a path on which we enter his death and Resurrection in order to have life. The Sundays of Lent, in this liturgical year of Cycle A in a quite particular way, introduce us to the experience of a baptismal journey, almost as if we were retracing the path of the catechumens, of those who are preparing to receive Baptism, in order to rekindle this gift within us and to ensure that our life may recover a sense of the demands and commitments of this sacrament which is at the root of our Christian life.

In the Message for this Lent I wished to recall the particular connection that binds Baptism to the Season of Lent. The Church has always associated the Easter Vigil with the celebration of Baptism, step by step. In it is brought about that great mystery through which man, dead to sin, is enabled to share in new life in the Risen Christ and receives the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead (*cf.* Rom 8:11).

The Readings we shall listen to on the coming Sundays and to which I ask you to pay special attention are taken up precisely by the ancient tradition which accompanied catechumens in the discovery of Baptism. These Readings are the great proclamation of what God brings about in this sacrament, a wonderful baptismal catechesis addressed to each one of us.

The First Sunday of Lent, known as the “Sunday of the Temptation” because it presents Jesus’

temptations in the wilderness, invites us to renew our definitive adherence to God and, in order to remain faithful to him, to face courageously the struggle that awaits us.

Over and over again we need determination, resistance to evil, we need to follow Jesus. On this Sunday, after hearing the testimony of the godparents and catechists, the Church celebrates the election of those who are admitted to the Easter sacraments.

The Second Sunday is called “of Abraham and of the Transfiguration”. Baptism is the sacrament of faith and of divine sonship; like Abraham, Father of believers, we too are asked to set out, to depart from our land, to give up the security we have created for ourselves in order to place our trust in God; the destination is glimpsed in the Transfiguration of Christ, the beloved Son, in whom we too become “sons of God”.

On the following Sundays, Baptism is presented in images of water, light and life. The Third Sunday makes us meet the Samaritan woman (*cf.* Jn 4:5-42). Like Israel in the Exodus, in Baptism we too have received the water that saves; Jesus, as the Samaritan woman says, has living water that quenches all thirst; and this water is the Spirit himself. On this Sunday the Church celebrates the First Scrutiny of the catechumens and during the week presents to them the Creed: the profession of faith.

The Fourth Sunday makes us reflect on the experience of the “man blind from birth” (*cf.* Jn 9:1-41). In Baptism, we are set free from the shadow of evil and receive Christ’s light in order to live as children of light. We too must learn to see in Christ’s Face God’s presence, hence light. The Second Scrutiny on the catechumen’s journey is celebrated.

Lastly, the Fifth Sunday presents to us the raising of Lazarus (*cf.* Jn 11:1-45). In Baptism we passed from death to life and were enabled to please God, to make the former person die so as to live by the Spirit of the Risen One. The Third Scrutiny for the catechumens is celebrated and during the week the *Lord’s Prayer* is presented to them.

In the Church’s tradition, this journey we are asked to take in Lent is marked by certain practices: fasting, almsgiving and prayer. Fasting means abstinence from food but includes other forms of privation for a more modest life. However, all this is not yet the full reality of fasting: it is an outer sign of an inner reality, of our commitment, with God’s help, to abstain from evil and to live by the Gospel. Those who are unable to nourish themselves with the word of God do not fast properly.

In the Christian tradition fasting is closely linked to almsgiving. St Leo the Great taught in one of his Discourses on Lent: “All that each Christian is bound to do in every season he must now do with greater solicitude and devotion in order to fulfil the apostolic prescription of Lenten fasting consistently, not only in abstinence from food but also and above all from sin. Furthermore, with this holy fasting which is only right, no work may be more fruitfully associated than almsgiving

which, under the one name of 'mercy', embraces many good works. The field of works of mercy is immense. It is not only the rich and the well-off who can benefit others with almsgiving, but also those of modest means and even the poor. Thus, although their futures differ, all may be the same in the soul's sentiments of piety" (*Sermon VI on Lent*, 2: PL 54, 286).

St Gregory the Great recalled in his *Pastoral Rule* that fasting is sanctified by the virtues that go with it, especially by charity, by every act of generosity, giving to the poor and needy the equivalent of something we ourselves have given up (*cf.* 19, 10-11). Lent, moreover, is a privileged period for prayer. St Augustine said that fasting and almsgiving are "the two wings of prayer" which enable it to gain momentum and more easily reach even to God.

He said: "In this way our prayers, made in humility and charity, in fasting and almsgiving, in temperance and in the forgiveness of offences, giving good things and not returning those that are bad, keeping away from evil and doing good, seek peace and achieve it. On the wings of these virtues our prayers fly safely and are more easily carried to Heaven, where Christ our Peace has preceded us" (*Sermon 206, 3 on Lent*: PL 38, 1042).

The Church knows that because of our weakness it is difficult to create silence in order to come before God and to acquire an awareness of our condition as creatures who depend on him, as sinners in need of his love. It is for this reason that in Lent she asks us to pray more faithfully, more intensely, and to prolong our meditation on the word of God.

St John Chrysostom urged: "Embellish your house with modesty and humility with the practice of prayer. Make your dwelling place shine with the light of justice; adorn its walls with good works, like a lustre of pure gold, and replace walls and precious stones with faith and supernatural magnanimity, putting prayer above all other things, high up in the gables, to give the whole complex decorum.

"You will thus prepare a worthy dwelling place for the Lord, you will welcome him in a splendid palace. He will grant you to transform your soul into a temple of his presence" (*Homily 6 on Prayer*: PG 64, 466).

Dear friends, on this Lenten journey let us be careful to accept Christ's invitation to follow him more decisively and consistently, renewing the grace and commitments of our Baptism, to cast off the former person within us and put on Christ, in order to arrive at Easter renewed and able to say, with St Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). I wish you all a good Lenten journey! Thank you!

To special groups:

I welcome all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from Ireland, Japan, South Korea and the United States. I also greet the pilgrims from Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. With prayerful good wishes for a spiritually fruitful Lent, I cordially invoke upon you and your families God's Blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly, I extend my greeting to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. May the Lenten Season which we are beginning today lead each one to an ever more intimate knowledge of Christ, so that in the different situations in which you live you may have his same sentiments and do all things in communion with him.

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