



The Holy See

PENITENTIAL PROCESSION PRESIDED BY THE HOLY FATHER
IN THE BASILICA OF SANTA SABINA ON THE AVENTINE HILL

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Ash Wednesday , 1st March 2006

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The penitential procession with which we began today's celebration has helped us enter the typical atmosphere of Lent, which is a personal and community pilgrimage of conversion and spiritual renewal.

According to the very ancient Roman tradition of Lenten *stationes*, during this season the faithful, together with the pilgrims, gather every day and make a stop - *statio* - at one of the many "memorials" of the Martyrs on which the Church of Rome is founded.

In the Basilicas where their relics are exposed, Holy Mass is celebrated, preceded by a procession during which the litanies of the Saints are sung. In this way, all those who bore witness to Christ with their blood are commemorated, and calling them to mind then becomes an incentive for each Christian to renew his or her own adherence to the Gospel.

These rites retain their value, despite the passing centuries, because they recall how important it also is in our day to accept Jesus' words without compromises: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9: 23).

Another symbolic rite, an exclusive gesture proper to the first day of Lent, is the *imposition of ashes*. What is its most significant meaning?

It is certainly not merely ritualistic, but something very deep that touches our hearts. It makes us understand the timeliness of the Prophet Joel's advice echoed in the First Reading, advice that still retains its salutary value for us: external gestures must always be matched by a sincere heart and consistent behaviour.

Indeed, the inspired author wonders, what use is it to tear our garments if our hearts remain distant from the Lord, that is, from goodness and justice? Here is what truly counts: to return to God with a sincerely contrite heart to obtain his mercy (cf. Jl 2: 12-18).

A new heart and a new spirit: we ask for this with the penitential Psalm par excellence, the *Miserere*, which we sing today with the response, "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned" (*The Sunday Missal*).

The true believer, aware of being a sinner, aspires with his whole self - spirit, heart and body - to divine forgiveness, as to a new creation that can restore joy and hope to him (cf. Ps 51[50]: 3, 5, 12, 14).

Another aspect of Lenten spirituality is what we could describe as "combative", as emerges in today's "Collect", where the "weapons" of penance and the "battle" against evil are mentioned.

Every day, but particularly in Lent, Christians must face a struggle, like the one that Christ underwent in the desert of Judea, where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil, and then in Gethsemane, when he rejected the most severe temptation, accepting the Father's will to the very end.

It is a spiritual battle waged against sin and finally, against Satan. It is a struggle that involves the whole of the person and demands attentive and constant watchfulness.

St Augustine remarks that those who want to walk in the love of God and in his mercy cannot be content with ridding themselves of grave and mortal sins, but "should do the truth, also recognizing sins that are considered less grave..., and come to the light by doing worthy actions. Even less grave sins, if they are ignored, proliferate and produce death" (*In Io. evang.* 12, 13, 35).

Lent reminds us, therefore, that Christian life is a never-ending combat in which the "weapons" of prayer, fasting and penance are used. Fighting against evil, against every form of selfishness and hate, and dying to oneself to live in God is the ascetic journey that every disciple of Jesus is called to make with humility and patience, with generosity and perseverance.

Following the divine Teacher in docility makes Christians witnesses and apostles of peace. We might say that this inner attitude also helps us to highlight more clearly what response Christians should give to the violence that is threatening peace in the world.

It should certainly not be revenge, nor hatred nor even flight into a false spiritualism. The response of those who follow Christ is rather to take the path chosen by the One who, in the face of the evils of his time and of all times, embraced the Cross with determination, following the longer but more effective path of love.

Following in his footsteps and united to him, we must all strive to oppose evil with good, falsehood with truth and hatred with love.

In the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, I wanted to present this love as the secret of our personal and ecclesial conversion. Referring to Paul's words to the Corinthians, "the love of Christ urges us on" (II Cor 5: 14), I stressed that "the consciousness that, in Christ, God has given himself for us, even unto death, must inspire us to live no longer for ourselves but for him, and, with him, for others" (n. 33).

Furthermore, love, as Jesus says today in the Gospel, must be expressed in practical acts for our neighbour, and especially for the poor and the needy, always subordinating the value of "good works" to the sincerity of the relationship with our "Father who is in Heaven", who "sees in secret" and "will reward" all whose good actions are humble and disinterested (cf. Mt 6: 1, 4, 6, 18).

The manifestation of love is one of the essential elements in the life of Christians who are encouraged by Jesus to be the light of the world, so that by seeing their "good works", people give glory to God (cf. Mt 5: 16).

This recommendation to us is particularly appropriate at the beginning of Lent, so that we may understand better and better that "for the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity... but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 25).

True love is expressed in acts that exclude no one, after the example of the Good Samaritan who, with great openness of heart, helped a stranger in difficulty whom he had met "by chance" along the way (cf. Lk 10: 31).

Your Eminences, venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood, dear men and women religious and lay faithful, all of whom I greet with warm cordiality, may we enter the typical atmosphere of this liturgical period with these sentiments, allowing the Word of God to enlighten and guide us.

In Lent we will often hear re-echoing the invitation to convert and to believe in the Gospel, and we will be constantly encouraged to open our spirit to the power of divine grace. Let us cherish the abundance of teachings that the Church will be offering us in these weeks.

Enlivened by a strong commitment to prayer, determined to make a greater effort of penance,

fasting and loving attention to our brethren, let us set out towards Easter accompanied by the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and model of every authentic disciple of Christ.

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