



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 , 9 March 2011

[Photo Gallery](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today we begin the [liturgical Season of Lent](#) with the evocative rite of the imposition of ashes through which we wish to commit ourselves to converting our hearts to the horizons of Grace. People generally associate this Season with the sadness and dreariness of life. On the contrary, it is a precious gift of God, a strong time full of meaning on the Church's path, it is the journey that leads to the Passover of the Lord.

The biblical Readings of today's celebration give us instructions for living this spiritual experience to the full. "Return to me with all your heart" (Joel 2:12). In the First Reading from the Book of the Prophet Joel we heard these words with which God invites the Jewish people to sincere and unostentatious repentance. This is not a superficial and transitory conversion; but a spiritual itinerary that deeply concerns the attitude of the conscience and implies sincere determination to reform.

The Prophet draws inspiration from the plague of locusts that descended on the people, destroying their crops, to ask them for inner repentance and to rend their hearts rather than their

clothing (*cf.* 2:13).

In other words, it is in practice a question of adopting an attitude of authentic conversion to God — of returning to him — recognizing his holiness, his power, his majesty.

And this conversion is possible because God is rich in mercy and great in love. His is a regenerating mercy that creates within us a pure heart, renews in our depths a firm spirit, restoring the joy of salvation (*cf.* Ps 51 [50]:14). God, in fact — as the Prophet says — does not want the sinner to die but to convert and live (*cf.* Ez 33:11).

The Prophet Joel orders in the Lord's name the creation of a favourable penitential environment: the trumpet must be blown to convoke the gathering and reawaken consciences. The Lenten Season proposes to us this liturgical and penitential environment: a journey of 40 days in which to experience God's merciful love effectively.

Today the appeal: "Return to me with all your heart", resounds for us. Today it is we who are called to convert our hearts to God, in the constant awareness that we cannot achieve conversion on our own, with our own efforts, because it is God who converts us. Furthermore, he offers us his forgiveness, asking us to return to him, to give us a new heart cleansed of the evil that clogs it, to enable us to share in his joy. Our world needs to be converted by God, it needs his forgiveness, his love, it needs a new heart.

"Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). In the Second Reading St Paul offers us another element on our journey of conversion. The Apostle invites us to remove our gaze from him and to pay attention instead to the One who sent him and to the content of the message he bears: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We therefore beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (*ibid.*).

An ambassador repeats what he has heard his Lord say and speaks with the authority and within the limits that he has been given. Anyone who serves in the office of ambassador must not draw attention to himself but must put himself at the service of the message to be transmitted and of the one who has sent it.

This is how St Paul acted in exercising his ministry as a preacher of the word of God and an Apostle of Jesus Christ. He does not shrink from the duty he has received, but carries it out with total dedication, asking us to open ourselves to Grace, to let God convert us. He writes: "Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain" (2 Cor 6:1).

"Christ's call to conversion", the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, "continues to resound in the lives of Christians... [it] is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church" which, "clasping sinners to her bosom", and "at once holy and always in need of purification... follows constantly

the path of penance and renewal". "This endeavour of conversion is not just a human work. It is the movement of a 'contrite heart' (Ps 51:17), drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first" (n. 1428).

St Paul was speaking to the Christians of Corinth but through them he intended to address all people. Indeed, all people have always needed God's grace which illuminates minds and hearts. And the Apostle immediately insists "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2). All can open themselves to God's action, to his love; with our evangelical witness we Christians must be a living message; indeed in many cases we are the only Gospel that men and women of today still read.

This is our responsibility, following in St Paul's footsteps, a further reason for living Lent fully: in order to bear a witness of faith lived to a world in difficulty in need of returning to God, in need of conversion.

"Beware of practising your piety before men in order to be seen by them" (Mt 6:1). In today's Gospel Jesus reinterprets the three fundamental pious practices prescribed by Mosaic law. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting characterize the Jew who observes the law. In the course of time these prescriptions were corroded by the rust of external formalism or even transformed into a sign of superiority.

In these three practices Jesus highlights a common temptation. Doing a good deed almost instinctively gives rise to the desire to be esteemed and admired for the good action, in other words to gain a reward. And on the one hand this closes us in on ourselves and on the other, it brings us out of ourselves because we live oriented to what others think of us or admire in us.

In proposing these prescriptions anew the Lord Jesus does not ask for formal respect of a law that is alien to the human being, imposed by a severe legislator as a heavy burden, but invites us to rediscover these three pious practices by living them more deeply, not out of self-love but out of love of God, as a means on the journey of conversion to him. Alms-giving, prayer and fasting: these are the path of the divine pedagogy that accompanies us not only in Lent, towards the encounter with the Risen Lord; a course to take without ostentation, in the certainty that the heavenly Father can read and also see into our heart in secret.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us set out confidently and joyfully on the Lenten journey. Forty days separate us from Easter; this "strong" season of the liturgical year is a favourable time which is granted to us so that we may attend more closely to our conversion, listen more intensely to the word of God and intensify our prayer and penance. We thereby open our hearts to docile acceptance of the divine will for a more generous practice of mortification thanks to which we can go more generously to the aid of our needy neighbour: a spiritual journey that prepares us to relive the Paschal Mystery.

May Mary, our guide on the Lenten journey, lead us to ever deeper knowledge of the dead and Risen Christ, help us in the spiritual combat against sin, and sustain us as we pray with conviction: “*Converte nos, Deus salutaris noster*” — “Convert us to you, O God, our salvation”. Amen!

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