



The Holy See

HOLY MASS, BLESSING AND IMPOSITION OF THE ASHES

HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS

Basilica of Santa Sabina

Wednesday, 18 February 2015

[Multimedia]

As the People of God begin the journey of Lent, the time in which we seek to be more firmly united to the Lord, to share the mystery of His Passion and His Resurrection.

Today's liturgy offers us first and foremost a passage from the Prophet Joel, whom God sent to call the People of God to repentance and conversion, due to a natural disaster (a plague of locusts) which was devastating Judea. The Lord alone can save us from the scourge and it is therefore necessary to entreat Him with prayer and fasting, confessing one's sins.

The Prophet emphasizes interior conversion: "return to me with all your heart" (2:12).

Returning to the Lord "with all your heart" means to begin the journey not of a superficial and transitory conversion, but rather of a spiritual itinerary with regard to the most intimate place of our person. The heart is, indeed, the seat of our feelings, the centre in which our decisions, our attitudes mature. That "return to me with all your heart" involves not only individuals, but is extended to the community as a whole. It is a convocation directed to everyone: "gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber" (v. 16). The Prophet pauses particularly on the prayer of the priests, pointing out that it is to be accompanied by tears. It will do us good, all of us, but especially for us as priests, at the beginning of Lent, to ask for the gift of tears, so as to render our prayer and our journey of conversion ever more authentic and free from hypocrisy. It will do us good to ask ourselves this question: "Do I weep? Does the Pope weep? Do the cardinals weep? Do bishops weep? Do the consecrated weep? Do priests weep? Is there weeping in our prayers?". And this is precisely the message of today's Gospel. In the passage from Matthew, Jesus again reads the three works of mercy called for by Mosaic law: almsgiving,

prayer and fasting. He distinguishes the external disposition from the interior disposition, from the weeping of the heart. Over time, these prescriptions were corroded by external formalism, or they even mutated into a sign of social superiority. Jesus highlighted a common temptation in these three works, that can be summarized precisely as hypocrisy (He mentions it three times): “Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them.... When you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do.... And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray... that they may be seen by men.... And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites...” (Mt 6:1, 2, 5, 16). You know, brothers, that hypocrites do not know how to weep, they have forgotten how to weep, they do not ask for the gift of tears.

When one performs a good work, the desire arises almost instinctively in us to be esteemed and admired for this good action, to gain satisfaction from it. Jesus calls us to perform these gestures without ostentation, and to rely solely on the reward of the Father “who sees in secret” (Mt 6:4, 6, 18).

Dear brothers and sisters, the Lord never tires of having mercy on us, and wants to offer us His forgiveness once again — we all need it — , inviting us to return to Him with a new heart, purified of evil, purified by tears, to take part in His joy. How should we accept this invitation? St Paul advises us: “We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20). This power of conversion is not only the work of mankind, it is letting oneself be reconciled. Reconciliation between us and God is possible thanks to the mercy of the Father who, out of love for us, did not hesitate to sacrifice His only begotten Son. Indeed Christ, who was just and without sin, was made to be sin (cf. v. 21) when, on the Cross, He took on the burden of our sins, and in this way He redeemed and justified us before God. “In Him” we can become just, in Him we can change, if we accept the grace of God and do not allow this “acceptable time” to pass in vain (6:2). Please, let us stop, let us stop a while and let ourselves be reconciled to God.

With this awareness, we begin the Lenten journey with trust and joy. May Immaculate Mother Mary, without sin, sustain our spiritual battle against sin, accompany us at this acceptable time, so that we may come together to sing of the exultant victory on Easter Day. And as a sign of the will to let ourselves be reconciled to God, in addition to the tears that will be “in secret”, in public we will perform this gesture of the imposition of Ashes on the head. The celebrant speaks these words: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (cf. Gen 3:19); or repeats the exhortation of Jesus: “Repent, and believe in the Gospel” (cf. Mk 1:15). Both formulae are a reference to the truth of human existence: we are limited creatures, always sinners in need of repentance and conversion. How important it is to listen to and accept this call in this time of ours! The call to conversion is thus an incentive to return, as the son in the parable did, to the arms of God, gentle and merciful Father, to weep in that embrace, to trust in Him and entrust ourselves to Him.

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