



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II GENERAL AUDIENCE *Ash Wednesday, 28 February 1979*

1. We meet today on the first day of Lent, Ash Wednesday. On this day, beginning the forty-day period of the preparation for Easter, the Church puts ashes on our heads and calls us to penitence. The word "penitence" recurs in so many pages of Holy Scripture, it re-echoes on the lips of so many prophets and, finally, in a particularly eloquent way, on the lips of Jesus Christ himself: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2). It can be said that Christ introduced the tradition of fasting or forty days into the liturgical year of the Church. because he himself "fasted forty days and forty nights" (Mt 4:2) before beginning to teach. With this forty-day fast, the Church is, in a certain sense, called every year to follow her Master and Lord, if she wishes to preach his Gospel effectively. The first day of Lent — just today — must testify in a particular way that the Church accepts this call by Christ and wishes to fulfil it.

2. Penitence in the evangelical sense means, above all, "conversion". From this aspect, the passage of the Gospel of Ash Wednesday is very significant. Jesus speaks of the carrying out of acts of penitence, known to and practised by his contemporaries, by the people of the Old Covenant. At the same time, however, he criticizes the purely "external" way in which these acts, charity, fasting, prayer, are carried out: because this way is contrary to the peculiar finality of the acts themselves. The purpose of the acts of penitence is a sincere turning to God to be able to meet him deep down in the human being, in the recesses of the heart. "Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do... that they may be praised by men...; do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who *sees in secret* will reward you." "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites... that they may be seen by men... But... go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who *sees in secret*, will reward you." "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites,... but anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Mt 6:2-6, 17-18). Therefore the first and principal meaning of penitence is interior, spiritual. The principal effort of penitence consists "in entering oneself", one's deepest being, entering this dimension of one's own humanity in which, in a certain sense, God is waiting for us. The "exterior" man must — I would say — yield, in each of us, to the "interior" man and, in a certain sense, "make way for him". In current life, man does not live enough on the "interior" plane. Jesus Christ clearly indicates that also acts of devotion and penitence (such as fasting, charity, prayer) which because of their religious finality are mainly "interior", may yield to the current "exteriorism", and can therefore be falsified. Penitence, on the

contrary, as turning to God, requires above all that man should reject appearances, succeed in freeing himself from falsity, and find himself again in all his interior truth. Even a rapid, summary look into the divine splendour of man's interior truth is already a success. It is necessary, however, to consolidate this success skilfully by means of systematic work on oneself. This work is called "asceticism" (it had already been given this name by the Greeks of the times of the origins of Christianity). Asceticism means an interior effort not to let oneself be swept along and pushed by the different "exterior" currents, in such a way as to remain always oneself and keep the dignity of one's own humanity. But the Lord Jesus calls us to do something more. When he says "go into your room and shut the door", he indicates an ascetic effort of the human spirit, which must not end in man himself. That shutting-in of oneself is, at the same time, the deepest opening of the human heart. It is indispensable for the purpose of meeting the Father, and must be undertaken for this purpose. "Your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Here it is a question of acquiring again the simplicity of thought, of will, and of heart which is indispensable to meet God in one's own "self". And God is waiting for that, in order to approach man who is absorbed interiorly and at the same time open to his word and his love! God wishes to communicate himself to the soul thus disposed. He wishes to give it truth and love, which have their real source in him.³ Then the main current of Lent must flow through the interior man, through hearts and consciences. The essential effort of repentance consists in this. In this effort the human determination to be converted to God is invested with the predisposing grace of conversion and, at the same time, of forgiveness and of spiritual liberation. Penance is not just an effort, a weight, but it is also a joy. Sometimes it is a great joy of the human spirit, a delight that other sources cannot bring forth. Contemporary man seems to have lost, to a certain extent, the flavour of this joy. He has also lost the deep sense of that spiritual effort, which makes it possible to find oneself again in the whole truth of one's interior being. Many causes and circumstances, which it is difficult to analyse in the limits of this discourse, contribute in this connection. Our civilization — especially in the West — closely connected with the development of science and technique, catches a glimpse of the need of intellectual and physical effort. But it has lost to a considerable extent the sense of the effort of the spirit, the fruit of which is man seen in his interior dimensions. When all is said and done, man living in the currents of this civilization very often loses his own dimension; he loses the interior sense of his own humanity. The effort that leads to the fruit just mentioned becomes alien to this man, as well as the joy that comes from it: the great joy of finding again and of meeting; the joy of Conversion (met à noia); the joy of Penitence. The severe liturgy of Ash Wednesday and, subsequently, the whole period of Lent is — as preparation for Easter — a systematic call to this joy: to the joy that fructifies from the effort of patiently finding oneself again: "By your endurance you will gain your lives" (Lk 21:19). Let no one be afraid to undertake this effort.

To representatives of the "Shinto" religion I SHOULD LIKE to express to the Venerable High Priest Nijo, High Priest of the Shrine of Ise, and to the thirty Shinto representatives here present, my joy and gratitude for having come to honour my humble person in the name of the whole Shintoist community. On such an auspicious occasion I wish to express my respect for the religion that you profess. The Catholic Church recognizes with reverence everything that is true, good and noble in your religion. Shintoism, the traditional religion of Japan, affirms for example that all men are equally sons of

God and that, because of this, all men are brothers. Moreover, in your religious tradition, you show a special sensitivity and appreciation for the harmony and beauty of nature, and you show a readiness to recognize there a revelation of God the Most High. I am also aware that in your noble teaching on personal asceticism you seek to make the heart of man ever more pure. The many things that we hold in common impel us to unite ever more closely in friendship and brotherhood in the service of all humanity. Gladly, therefore, I invoke upon each of you, upon your families, and upon the entire Japanese people a special blessing from the Most High.

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