



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Ash Wednesday, 5 March 2003

The reconciled will be effective peacemakers

1. With the words of the Apostle Paul, on Ash Wednesday, the liturgy addresses to all the faithful a vigorous invitation to conversion: "*We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God*" (II Cor 5,20). Lent is the more favourable spiritual season to receive this exhortation because it is a season of more serious prayer, penance, and greater attention to the needs of our brothers and sisters.

With today's rite of the imposition of ashes, we recognize that we are sinners and, showing a sincere desire for conversion, ask God's pardon. Thus we begin an austere ascetical journey that will lead us to the Easter Triduum, the heart of the liturgical year.

2. In keeping with the ancient tradition of the Church, today all the faithful are bound to abstain from eating meat, and all, with the sole exception of those who are justifiably prevented for reasons of health or age, must fast. Fasting has great value in the life of Christians. It is a spiritual need, in order to relate better to God. In fact, the external aspects of fasting, though important, do not convey the full measure of the practice. Joined to the practice should be a sincere desire for inner purification, readiness to obey the divine will and thoughtful solidarity with our brothers and sisters, especially the very poor.

There is also a close link between fasting and prayer. Prayer means listening to God; fasting favours this openness of heart.

3. As we enter the Lenten season, we need to be aware of today's international situation, troubled by the tensions and threats of war. It is necessary that everyone consciously assume responsibility and engage in a common effort to spare humanity another tragic conflict. This is why I wanted this

Ash Wednesday to be a *Day of Prayer and Fasting* to implore peace for the world. We must ask God, first of all, for conversion of heart, for it is in the heart that every form of evil, every impulse to sin is rooted; we must pray and fast for the peaceful coexistence of peoples and nations.

At the beginning of our gathering, we heard the encouraging words of the Prophet: "*Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they train for war again*" (Is 2,4); and again: "*They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks*" (*ibid.*). Above the upheavals of history there is the sovereign presence of God who judges human decisions. Let us open our hearts to him who will "*judge between the nations*", and "*decide for many peoples*" (cf. *ibid.*) and implore him to grant a future of justice and peace for all. This thought should stimulate each one of us to persevere in unceasing prayer and in an effective dedication to build a world in which selfishness may give way to solidarity and love.

4. I also wanted to repropose the pressing invitation to conversion, penance and solidarity in the [*Message for Lent*](#), published a few days ago, whose theme is the beautiful sentence from the Acts of the Apostles: "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (cf. 20,35).

A close look shows that it is only by being converted to this logic that it is possible to build a social order which is not based on a precarious balance of conflicting interests, but by a just and solidary pursuit of the common good. Christians, in the manner of leaven, are called to live and spread a style of generosity in every realm of life, thus promoting genuine moral and civil social progress. On this topic I wrote: "*Giving not only from our abundance, but sacrificing something more in order to give to the needy, fosters that self-denial which is essential to authentic Christian living*" ([*Message for Lent*](#), n. 4; *ORE*, 12 February 2003, p. 6).

5. May this day of prayer and fasting for peace with which we begin Lent be translated into concrete acts of reconciliation. From the family circle to the international realm, may each person feel and be *co-responsible for building peace*. Then the God of peace who examines the intentions of hearts and calls his children to be peacemakers (cf. Mt 5,9) will not fail to reward us (cf. Mt 6, 4.6.18).

Let us entrust these wishes of ours to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Queen of the Rosary and Mother of Peace. May she take us by the hand and accompany us during the next 40 days on our way to Easter, to contemplate the Risen Lord.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking pilgrims present today, especially those from England, Ireland, Norway, Denmark, Japan, and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the

grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. May everyone have a blessed and fruitful season of Lent!

To Polish pilgrims

This year Ash Wednesday is also a day of prayer and fasting to implore peace for the world. I believe, that when peace is at stake, it is never too late for dialogue. For this reason, I asked for the prayer and fasting. May these be concrete gestures of co-responsibility by those who believe in the mission of reminding the world that it is never too late for peace.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

I also affectionately greet the *young people*, the *sick* and *newly-weds*.

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lenten season which we begin today be a journey of conversion to Christ. According to each one's life situation, may it be the favourable time to express in daily life the sentiments of our Saviour who gave his life for us on the Cross. May we find comfort and support in his sacrifice, offered for the salvation of all humanity.