



The Holy See

ASH WEDNESDAY

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 8 March 2000

1. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy Spirit from me" (*Ps 51: 10-11*). Today, Ash Wednesday, this is how the Psalmist, King David, prays: a great and powerful king in Israel, but at the same time frail and sinful. At the beginning of these 40 days of preparation for Easter, the Church puts his words on the lips of all who take part in the austere liturgy of Ash Wednesday. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, ... take not your holy Spirit from me". We hear this plea echoing in our hearts, while in a few moments we will approach the Lord's altar to receive ashes on our forehead in accordance with a very ancient tradition. This act is filled with spiritual allusions and is an important sign of conversion and inner renewal. Considered in itself, it is a simple liturgical rite, but very profound because of its penitential meaning: with it the Church reminds man, believer and sinner, of his weakness in the face of evil and especially of his total dependence on God's infinite majesty. The liturgy calls for the celebrant to say these words as he places ashes on the foreheads of the faithful: "Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return"; or, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel".

2. "Remember, ... to dust you will return". Earthly life is marked from its beginning by the prospect of death. Our bodies are mortal, that is, subject to the inevitable prospect of death. We live with this end before us: every passing day brings us inexorably closer to it. And death has something destructive about it. With death it seems that everything will end for us. And here, precisely in the face of this disheartening prospect, man, who is aware of his sin, raises a cry of hope to heaven: O God, "create in me a clean heart and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy Spirit from me". Today too, the believer who feels threatened by evil and death calls on God in this way, knowing that he has reserved for him a destiny of eternal life. He knows that he is not only a body condemned to death because of sin, but that he also has an immortal soul. Therefore he turns to God the Father, who has the power to create out of nothing; to God the Only-begotten Son, who became man for our salvation, died for us and now, risen, lives in glory; to God the immortal Spirit, who calls us to life and restores life. "Create in me a clean heart and put a new and right spirit within me". The whole Church makes the Psalmist's prayer her own. These are prophetic words that penetrate our spirit on this special day, the first day of the Lenten journey that will bring us to the celebration of

Easter during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.3. "Repent and believe in the Gospel". This invitation, which we find at the beginning of Jesus' preaching, introduces us into the Lenten season, a time to be dedicated in a special way to conversion and renewal, to prayer, to fasting and to works of charity. In recalling the experience of the chosen people, we too set out as it were to retrace the journey that Israel made across the desert to the Promised Land. We too will reach our goal; after these weeks of penance, we will experience the joy of Easter. Our eyes, purified by prayer and penance, will be able to behold with greater clarity the face of the living God, to whom man makes his own pilgrimage on the paths of earthly life."Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy Spirit from me" - this man, created not for death but for life, prays in exactly this way. Although he is aware of his weaknesses, he walks sustained by the certainty of his divine destiny. May almighty God hear the prayers of the Church which, in today's Ash Wednesday liturgy, lifts up her heart to heaven with greater trust. May the merciful Lord grant us all to open our hearts to the gift of his grace, so that we can all take part with new maturity in the paschal mystery of Christ, our only Redeemer.

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