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General audience: Lent, journey of hope

Lent as a journey of hope was the theme of Pope Francis' catechesis during the general audience today, Ash Wednesday, which opens this liturgical time. The audience was held in St. Peter's Square.

The Holy Father explained that Lent was instituted by the Church as a time for preparation for Easter, and therefore all the meaning of this period of forty days draws light from the Paschal mystery towards which it leads. "We can imagine the Risen Lord who calls us to emerge from our shadows, and we set out again on the path towards He Who is the Light. Lent is a period of penance, also of mortification, but not an end in itself; rather, it aims at enabling us to rise again with Christ, to renew our baptismal identity, that is, to be newly reborn 'from on high', from God's love. This is why Lent is, by nature, a time of hope".

The meaning of Lent is better understood in the light of exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, narrated in the Bible in the book of the same name, Exodus. The starting point is the condition of slavery in Egypt: oppression, forced labour. But the Lord has not forgotten His people and His promise: he calls Moses and, with his strong arm, leads the Israelites out of Egypt and guides them towards the desert towards the land of the free. "During this journey from slavery to freedom, the Lord gives the Israelites the law, to educate them in how to love Him, the only Lord, and to love each other as brothers. The Scripture shows that the exodus was long and tiresome", observed Francis. "Symbolically it lasts forty years, that is, the time of life of a generation. A generation that, faced with the trials of the journey, is always tempted to regret leaving Egypt and to turn back. But the Lord stays faithful and that poor people, guided by Moses, arrive in the promised Land. The whole journey is undertaken in hope: the hope of reaching the Land, and precisely in this sense it is an exodus, an exit from slavery to freedom. Every step, every hardship, every fall and every recovery: all of this has meaning only the plan for salvation of God, Who wants life for His people, not death; joy and not pain".

"Easter is Jesus' exodus, by which He opened the way to reach full, eternal and blessed life. To open up this way, this passage, Jesus had to despoil Himself of His glory, humiliate Himself, make Himself obedient up to the point of death, and to death on the cross. Opening the way to eternal life cost Him all His blood, and thanks to Him we have been saved from the slavery of sin. But this does not mean that He has done everything and we must do nothing; that He has passed through the cross and we go to Paradise by carriage. It is not like this. Our salvation is certainly His gift, but since it is a story of love, it requires our 'yes' and our participation, as our Mother Mary shows us, and after her, all the saints".

“Lent lives according to this dynamic: Christ precedes us with His exodus, and we cross the desert thanks to Him and behind Him. He is tempted for us, and defeated the Tempter for us, but we too must face temptations, with Him, and overcome them. He gives us the living water of His Spirit, and it is for us to draw from the source and drink, in the Sacraments, in prayer, in adoration; He is the light that disperses the shadows, and we are required to feed the flame that is entrusted to us on the day of our Baptism”.

In this sense, as we read in the Roman Missal, Lent is the sacramental sign of our conversion, and one who follows the path of Lent is always on a journey of conversion. Lent, Francis repeated, is the sacramental sign of our journey from slavery to freedom, always to be renewed. “A journey that is certainly demanding, and rightly so, because love is demanding, but it is a journey full of hope”, the Pope affirmed. “Indeed, I would go further: the Lenten exodus is the path by which hope itself is formed. The fatigue of crossing the desert – all the hardships, temptations, illusions, mirages – all this serves to forge a strong and steadfast hope, modelled on that of the Virgin Mary, who in the midst of the shadows of the passion and the death of her Son continued to believe and to hope in His resurrection, in the victory of God’s love”.

“With the heart open to this horizon, we enter Lent”, the Holy Father concluded. “Aware that we are part of the holy people of God, let us start out joyfully on this journey of hope”.
