

On the Lenten Journey

"A Spiritual Retreat That Lasts 40 Days"

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, Ash Wednesday, we begin again our Lenten journey as we do every year, with a more intense spirit of prayer and reflection, of penance and of fasting. We are entering into a very "intense" liturgical season that, while preparing us for the celebration of Easter -- the heart of the Church calendar and of our very existence -- invites us, or we could say, provokes us, to push forward in our Christian lives.

Since our commitments and our worries keep us living the same routine, putting us at risk of forgetting just how extraordinary this adventure is that Christ has involved us in, we need to begin again each day with the demanding itinerary of evangelical life, retreating within ourselves through moments of reflection that regenerate our spirit. With the ancient ritual of the imposition of the ashes, the Church introduces Lent as a spiritual retreat that lasts 40 days.

In this way we enter into the atmosphere of Lent, which helps us rediscover the gift of faith received at baptism and which encourages us to approach the sacrament of reconciliation, placing our commitment to conversion under the symbol of divine mercy. Originally in the early Church, Lent was a privileged time given to those catechumens preparing for the sacrament of baptism and of the Eucharist, which were celebrated during the Easter Vigil. Lent was considered a time in which one became Christian, but this did not happen in a single moment. It is a long journey of conversion and renewal.

Those who had already been baptized joined with them in this journey remembering the sacrament they had received and prepared to join again with Christ in the joyous celebration of Easter. In this way, Easter had and still retains today the feeling and character of a baptism, in the sense that it keeps alive the understanding that being a Christian is never a journey's end that is behind us, but a path that constantly demands renewed effort.

Upon placing ashes on the faithful, the celebrant says: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" (cf. Genesis 3:19), or he repeats Jesus' exhortation: "Convert and believe in the Gospel" (cf. Mark 1:15). Both practices recall the truth of human existence: We are limited creatures, sinners constantly in need of penitence and conversion. How important it is in our day and age to listen and welcome such a call! When proclaiming his independence from God, the contemporary man becomes his own slave and often finds himself inconsolably alone. The invitation to convert is therefore a spur to return to the arms of God, caring and merciful Father, to trust him, to entrust oneself to him like adopted children, regenerated by his love.

Teaching with wisdom the Church reiterates that conversion is above all a grace, a gift that opens the heart to God's infinite love. Through his grace he anticipates our desire for conversion and supports our efforts toward full adherence to his saving will. To convert means to let Jesus win our hearts (cf. Philippians 3:12) and "to return" with him to the Father.

Conversion therefore means to give oneself to the teachings of Jesus and to obediently follow in his footprints. The words he uses to explain how to be his true disciples are enlightening. After affirming that "he who wants to save his own life will lose it; but he who will lose his own life for me and the Gospel will save it." He adds: "To what good can man earn the whole world, if he loses his own soul"? (Mark 8:35-36).

Attainment of success, longing for prestige and search for comfort: When these things absorb life entirely until they exclude God from one's own horizon, do they really lead to happiness? Can there be true happiness without God? Experience shows that we are not happy because we satisfy material expectations. In truth, the sole delight that fills a man's heart is the one that comes from God: We truly need this infinite joy. Neither the daily worries, nor the difficulty of life can cancel out the joy that comes from our friendship with God. At first Jesus' invitation to take up our cross and follow him can seem hard and against our wishes -- even mortifying because of our desire for personal success. But if we look closer we discover that it is not like that: The saints are proof that in the Cross of Christ, in the love that is given renouncing self-possession, we find a profound serenity that is the foundation of generous devotion to our brothers, especially the poor and the needy. This gives us joy.

The Lenten walk to conversion, which we undertake today with the whole Church, becomes the propitious occasion, "the favorable moment" (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:2) to yield ourselves once again to the hands of God and to practice what Jesus continuously repeats to us: "If someone wants to follow me he must renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34), and thus take the path of love and true happiness.

During Lent the Church, in keeping with the Gospel, proposes certain specific duties which assist the faithful in this journey of inner renewal: prayer, fasting and charity. This year, in the message for Lent published a few days ago, I wanted to focus on "almsgiving, which represents a specific way to assist those in need and, at the same time, an exercise in self-denial to free us from attachment to worldly goods" (No.1).

We are unfortunately aware of how deeply the desire for material riches pervades modern society. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are taught not to idolize earthly goods, but to use them to live and to help those who are in need. In teaching us to be charitable, the Church teaches us to address the needs of our neighbor, imitating Christ as noted by St. Paul. He became poor to enrich us with his poverty (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9). "In His school" -- I discuss this in more detail in the message for Lent -- "we can learn to make of our lives a total gift; imitating Him, we are able to make ourselves available, not so much in giving a part of what we possess, but our very selves."

I continue: "Cannot the entire Gospel be summarized perhaps in the one commandment of love? The Lenten practice of almsgiving thus becomes a means to deepen our Christian vocation. In gratuitously offering himself, the Christian bears witness that it is love and not material richness that determines the laws of his existence."

Dear brothers and sisters, we ask Mary, Mother of God and the Church, to walk with us on the Lenten journey, to make it a journey of true conversion. Let us be led by her and we will arrive -- profoundly renewed -- at the celebration of the great mystery of the Easter of Christ, the supreme revelation of God's merciful love.

A blessed Lent to all of you!

[After praying the Angelus, the Holy Father greeted pilgrims in six languages. In English, he said:]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, Ash Wednesday, marks the beginning of our annual Lenten journey of prayer and penance. In the early Church, Lent was the time when catechumens prepared for Baptism, accompanied by the prayers of the whole Christian community. Today, too, the Lenten season is a privileged moment of conversion and spiritual renewal for the whole Church. The rite of the imposition of ashes is a summons to return to God and, in doing so, to discover authentic freedom and joy. Jesus reminds us that only by "losing" our life will we truly "find" it. Our ultimate fulfillment is found in God alone, who satisfies our deepest longings. By taking up our cross and following the Lord, we experience redemption, inner peace and loving solidarity with our brothers and sisters. During Lent, in addition to prayer and fasting, the Church invites us to practice almsgiving as an expression of our desire to imitate Christ's own self-giving and his generous concern for others. As we set out once again on this journey of spiritual renewal, may Mary, Mother of the Church, guide us to a fruitful celebration of Easter. A Blessed Lent to all of you!

This morning I am especially pleased to greet the delegation of government leaders from Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, and I offer my prayerful good wishes for their efforts to promote reconciliation, justice and peace in the region. My warm greeting and prayerful encouragement also goes to the participants in the Graduate School of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute. I thank the choir for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England and the United States, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

Address of Benedict XVI delivered on Ash Wednesday, at the general audience in Paul VI Hall.
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