



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Ash Wednesday, 21 February 2007*

Greetings to a group of predominantly young people gathered in St Peter's Basilica:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am happy to greet you and to address my cordial welcome to each one of you, with a special greeting for the many school children present here.

Today, Lent begins, a "powerful" liturgical season, a time of peace and of commitment to serving our brothers and sisters, to be lived keeping our gaze always fixed on Jesus, who is setting out towards his death and Resurrection.

Dear *young people*, take this invitation as if Christ were addressing it personally to each one of you and accept it generously.

By faithfully taking the austere Lenten journey, you will be able to become aware of the risks to which your spiritual life is exposed and will be encouraged to fulfil your Christian vocation joyfully. Mary is beside you, the Woman of Hope who sustains you and guides you with her motherly tenderness during the 40 days that lead us to Easter.

With her help, renewed within the great Paschal Mystery, you will be able to celebrate the central event of salvation and the supreme revelation of God's merciful love.

A good Lent to you all!

Ash Wednesday

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Ash Wednesday, which we are celebrating today, is a special day for us Christians, marked by an intense spirit of recollection and reflection. In fact, we are setting out on the journey of Lent, which consists in listening to the Word of God and in prayer and penance.

For 40 days the liturgy will help us relive the salient phases of the mystery of salvation. As we know, man was created to be a friend of God; but the sin of our first parents destroyed this relationship of trust and love and consequently rendered humankind incapable of fulfilling its original vocation.

Yet, thanks to Christ's redeeming sacrifice, we were saved from the power of evil: indeed, Christ, the Apostle John wrote, made himself a victim of expiation for our sins (cf. I Jn 2: 2); and St Peter added: he died for our sins once and for all (cf. I Pt 3: 18).

Dead in Christ to sin, the baptized person is reborn to new life, freely re-established with his dignity as a child of God. For this reason, in the primitive Christian community Baptism was considered as "the first resurrection" (cf. Rv 20: 5; Rom 6: 1-11; Jn 5: 25-28).

From the outset, therefore, Lent was lived as the season of immediate preparation for Baptism, to be solemnly administered during the Easter Vigil. The whole of Lent was a journey towards this important encounter with Christ, this immersion in Christ, this renewal of life. We have already been baptized but Baptism is often not very effective in our daily life.

Therefore, Lent is a renewed "catechumenate" for us too, in which once again we approach our Baptism to rediscover and relive it in depth, to return to being truly Christian.

Lent is thus an opportunity to "become" Christian "anew", through a constant process of inner change and progress in the knowledge and love of Christ. Conversion is never once and for all but is a process, an interior journey through the whole of life.

This process of evangelical conversion cannot, of course, be restricted to a specific period of the year: it is a daily journey that must embrace the entire span of existence, every day of our life.

In this perspective, for each Christian and for all Ecclesial Communities, Lent is the favourable spiritual season for training ourselves to seek God with greater tenacity, opening our heart to Christ.

St Augustine once said that our life is a unique exercise of the desire to draw close to God, of becoming able to let God into our being. "The entire life of the fervent Christian", he says, "is holy desire".

If this is the case, we are further inspired in Lent to "tear out the roots of vanity from our desires", to teach the heart to desire, that is, to love God.

"God", St Augustine says further, "*this simple syllable is all we desire*" (cf. *Tract in Iohn.*, 4). And let us hope that we may truly begin to desire God and thus to desire true life, love itself and the truth.

Then, Jesus' exhortation, recorded by the Evangelist Mark, rings out more timely than ever: Repent, and believe in the Gospel (cf. Mk 1: 15). The sincere desire for God prompts us to reject evil and to do good.

This conversion of the heart is primarily a free gift from God, who created us for himself and redeemed us in Jesus Christ: our true happiness consists in dwelling in him (cf. Jn 15: 3).

For this reason he himself anticipates our desire with his grace and accompanies our efforts for conversion.

What does "to be converted" actually mean? It means seeking God, moving with God, docilely following the teachings of his Son, Jesus Christ; to be converted is not a work for self-fulfilment because the human being is not the architect of his own eternal destiny. We did not make ourselves.

Therefore, self-fulfilment is a contradiction and is also too little for us. We have a loftier destination. We might say that conversion consists precisely in not considering ourselves as our own "creators" and thereby discovering the truth, for we are not the authors of ourselves.

Conversion consists in freely and lovingly accepting to depend in all things on God, our true Creator, to depend on love. This is not dependence but freedom.

To be converted thus means not pursuing one's own personal success - that is something ephemeral - but giving up all human security, treading in the Lord's footsteps with simplicity and trust so that Jesus may become for each one, as Blessed Teresa of Calcutta liked to say, "my All in all".

Those who let themselves be conquered by him do not fear losing their life, for on the Cross he loved us and gave himself for us. It is precisely by losing our life for love that we rediscover it.

In my [Message for Lent](#), published a few days ago, I wanted to highlight the immense love God has for us, so that Christians of every community can pause in spirit during the Lenten Season with Mary and John, the beloved disciple, beside the One who on the Cross consummated the sacrifice of his life for humanity (cf. Jn 19: 25).

Yes, dear brothers and sisters, the Cross is the definitive revelation of love and divine mercy for us as well, men and women of this epoch, all too often distracted by earthly and transient apprehensions and concerns.

God is love, and his love is the secret of our happiness. So it is that there is no other way to enter into this mystery of love than to lose ourselves, to give ourselves: the way of the Cross.

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk 8: 34).

This is why the Lenten liturgy, while it invites us to reflect and to pray, spurs us to hold penance and sacrifice in greater esteem, to reject sin and evil and to conquer selfishness and indifference.

Prayer, fasting and penance, and charitable works for our brethren thus become spiritual paths on which to start out in order to return to God, in response to the repeated appeals to conversion that today's liturgy also contains (cf. Jl 2: 12-13; Mt 6: 16-18).

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lenten Season, which we are beginning today with the austere and significant Rite of the Imposition of Ashes, be a renewed experience of the merciful love of Christ, who poured out his Blood for us on the Cross.

Let us docilely attend his school, to learn in turn to "give anew" his love to our neighbours, especially those who are suffering and in difficulty. This is the mission of every disciple of Christ, but to carry it out it is essential to continue listening to his Word and to be assiduously nourished by his Body and his Blood.

May the Lenten journey, which in the ancient Church was a journey towards Christian initiation, towards Baptism and the Eucharist, be a "Eucharistic" Season for us in which we participate with greater fervour in the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

May the Virgin Mary, who after sharing in the sorrowful Passion of her divine Son experienced the joy of his Resurrection, accompany us during this Lent towards the Mystery of Easter, the supreme Revelation of God's Love.

A good Lent to you all!

To special groups

I am pleased to greet the pilgrimage group from the Diocese of Jelgava in Latvia, led by Bishop Antons Justs. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Wales, Ireland, Finland, Japan and the United States, I cordially invoke God's Blessings for a fruitful and spiritually enriching Lent.

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Welcome, dear friends. The Pope has a special place in his heart for you. To all of you and to your loved ones I address my affectionate greeting, which I accompany with a special Blessing.

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