



The Holy See

HOLY MASS, BLESSING AND IMPOSITION OF THE ASHES

HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS

*Basilica of Santa Sabina
Wednesday, 5 March 2014*

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“Rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joel 2:13).

With these penetrating words of the Prophet Joel, the liturgy today introduces us into Lent, pointing to conversion of heart as the chief characteristic of this season of grace. The prophetic appeal challenges all of us without exception, and it reminds us that conversion is not to be reduced to outward forms or to vague intentions, but engages and transforms one’s entire existence beginning from the centre of the person, from the conscience. We are invited to embark upon a journey on which, by defying routine, we strive to open our eyes and ears, but especially to open our hearts, in order to go beyond our own “backyard”.

Opening oneself to God and to the brethren. We know that this increasingly artificial world would have us live in a culture of “doing”, of the “useful”, where we exclude God from our horizon without realizing it. But we also exclude the horizon itself! Lent beacons us to “rouse ourselves”, to remind ourselves that we are creatures, simply put, that we are not God. In the little daily scene, as I look at some of the power struggles to occupy spaces, I think: these people are playing God the Creator. They still have not realized that they are not God.

And we also risk closing ourselves off to others and forgetting them. But only when the difficulties and suffering of others confront and question us may we begin our journey of conversion towards Easter. It is an itinerary which involves the Cross and self-denial. Today’s Gospel indicates the

elements of this spiritual journey: prayer, fasting and almsgiving (cf. Mt 6:1-6; 16-18). All three exclude the need for appearances: what counts is not appearances; the value of life does not depend on the approval of others or on success, but on what we have inside us.

The first element is prayer. Prayer is the strength of the Christian and of every person who believes. In the weakness and frailty of our lives, we can turn to God with the confidence of children and enter into communion with him. In the face of so many wounds that hurt us and could harden our hearts, we are called to dive into the sea of prayer, which is the sea of God's boundless love, to taste his tenderness. Lent is a time of prayer, of more intense prayer, more prolonged, more assiduous, more able to take on the needs of the brethren; intercessory prayer, to intercede before God for the many situations of poverty and suffering.

The second key element of the Lenten journey is fasting. We must be careful not to practice a formal fast, or one which in truth "satisfies" us because it makes us feel good about ourselves. Fasting makes sense if it questions our security, and if it also leads to some benefit for others, if it helps us to cultivate the style of the Good Samaritan, who bends down to his brother in need and takes care of him. Fasting involves choosing a sober lifestyle; a way of life that does not waste, a way of life that does not "throw away". Fasting helps us to attune our hearts to the essential and to sharing. It is a sign of awareness and responsibility in the face of injustice, abuse, especially to the poor and the little ones, and it is a sign of the trust we place in God and in his providence.

The third element is almsgiving: it points to giving freely, for in almsgiving one gives something to someone from whom one does not expect to receive anything in return. Gratuitousness should be one of the characteristics of the Christian, who aware of having received everything from God gratuitously, that is, without any merit of his own, learns to give to others freely. Today gratuitousness is often not part of daily life where everything is bought and sold. Everything is calculated and measured. Almsgiving helps us to experience giving freely, which leads to freedom from the obsession of possessing, from the fear of losing what we have, from the sadness of one who does not wish to share his wealth with others.

With its invitations to conversion, Lent comes providentially to awaken us, to rouse us from torpor, from the risk of moving forward by inertia. The exhortation which the Lord addresses to us through the prophet Joel is strong and clear: "Return to me with all your heart" (Jl 2:12). Why must we return to God? Because something is not right in us, not right in society, in the Church and we need to change, to give it a new direction. And this is called needing to convert! Once again Lent comes to make its prophetic appeal, to remind us that it is possible to create something new within ourselves and around us, simply because God is faithful, always faithful, for he cannot deny himself, he continues to be rich in goodness and mercy, and he is always ready to forgive and start afresh. With this filial confidence, let us set out on the journey!

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