



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 25 February 1998

***Season of Lent as a time of conversion
and renewed friendship with Christ***

1. Today the liturgy of Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of our Lenten journey that will culminate in the principal event of the liturgical year, the Easter Triduum, celebrating Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection.

Jesus spent 40 days in the desert before undertaking his mission; in the same way we are invited today to enter an important season of reflection and prayer, in order to journey towards Calvary and later to experience the joy of the Resurrection. The beginning of this unique time of penance consists of a symbolic and significant action: *the imposition of ashes*. By recalling the transitory nature of earthly life it reminds us of the need for generous ascetical effort, which leads to the courageous decision not to do our own will but, following Jesus' example, to do the will of the heavenly Father.

The reception of ashes also emphasizes our condition as creatures who live in total and grateful dependence on the Creator. Indeed, it is God who, by a surprising act of love and mercy, drew man from the dust, endowing him with an immortal soul and calling him to share his own divine life. It will also be God who will raise him up from the dust on the last day and transform his mortal body.

2. The humble act of receiving blessed ashes on the head, strengthened by the invitation that rings out in the liturgy today: "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel", counteracts the proud gesture of Adam and Eve who by their disobedience destroyed the bond of friendship with God the Creator. Because of this initial tragedy, we all run the risk, despite Baptism, of yielding to

the recurring temptation that spurs human beings to live in arrogant autonomy from God and in perennial antagonism towards their neighbour.

Here then is revealed the meaning and necessity of the Lenten season which, by its call to conversion, leads us through prayer, penance and acts of fraternal solidarity to renew or reinvigorate our friendship with Jesus in faith, to free ourselves from the deceptive promises of earthly happiness and once again to savour the harmony of the interior life in authentic love for Christ.

3. I make my own what St Leo the Great said in one of his Lenten sermons: "Works of virtue do not exist without the trial of temptations; no faith goes unopposed; no struggle is without an enemy, no victory without a battle. We live our lives amid snares and struggles. If we do not want to be deceived, we must be watchful; if we want to win, we must fight" (*Sermon XXXIX*, 3).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us accept this invitation. It demands arduous discipline, especially in today's social context which is frequently marked by easy escape and practical atheism. The Holy Spirit comforts and strengthens us in this struggle. He "helps us in our weakness", as the Apostle Paul assures us, "for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26).

It is precisely to the Holy Spirit that this second year of immediate preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 is dedicated. I wrote in my Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*: "Hence it will be important to gain a renewed appreciation of the Spirit as the One who builds the kingdom of God within the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ, stirring people's hearts and quickening in our world the seeds of the full salvation which will come at the end of time" (n. 45).

4. Let us then be guided by the Holy Spirit during this favourable season: it is the Spirit himself who, in order to prepare Jesus for his mission, drove him into the wilderness of temptation and then consoled him at the moment of trial, accompanying him from the Garden of Olives to Golgotha. The Holy Spirit is close to us through the grace of the sacraments. Particularly in the sacrament of Reconciliation, he leads us on the way of repentance and the confession of our sins, in the merciful arms of our Father.

I deeply hope that Lent will be a favourable occasion for every Christian to undertake this journey of conversion, for which the sacrament of Penance is the fundamental and indispensable point of reference. This is the condition for achieving a deeper and more intimate experience of the Father's love.

May Mary, the example of docile openness to God's Spirit, accompany us on our Lenten journey. We turn to her today, as we enter, with all believers throughout the world, into the austere and

penitential atmosphere of Lent.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I extend a special welcome to the various ecumenical groups present at this Audience and I encourage you to continue to work for ever closer unity among Christians. I greet the many young people here today, especially the student groups, and in particular the children's choir of St Hallvard in Oslo. Upon all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims, especially those from England, Northern Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the strengthening gifts of the Holy Spirit.

PEACE APPEAL

The Holy Father appealed to the whole Church for solidarity with the distressed peoples and the five religious kidnapped in Sierra Leone.

The Holy See continues to receive disturbing news from several African regions and particularly from Sierra Leone, where opposing factions are fighting one another, causing painful suffering for those beloved peoples.

My thoughts turn to the five kidnapped religious: they are worthy missionaries of the Hospitaller Brothers and the Augustinians. Just as worrying is the information about the fate of dozens of men and women religious in the Diocese of Makeni, entrusted to the pastoral care of the Xaverian Bishop, George Biguzzi.

May they and all the peoples of Sierra Leone be assured of my deep solidarity and that of the whole Church.