

Lenten Station Homily

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The Holy Father

In The Basilica Of St. Sabina On The Aventine Hill

Ash Wednesday, 5 March 2003

1. *"Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people, notify the congregation" (Jl 2,15-16).*

These words of the Prophet Joel, that we have just heard, emphasize the communal dimension of penance. Certainly, repentance can only come from the heart, that, according to biblical anthropology, is the "seat" of the deepest human inclinations. However, penitential acts should be lived together with the members of our community.

Especially, at difficult moments, after a misfortune or when danger threatened, the Word of God on the lips of the prophets used to call believers to a penitential mobilization. All were called, no one was left out, from the elderly to infants; all were as one in imploring from God compassion and pardon (cf. Jl 2,16-18).

2. The Christian community listens to this vigorous invitation to conversion as it gets ready to undertake the Lenten journey that begins with the ancient rite of the imposition of ashes. This gesture, that some might consider outmoded, certainly clashes with the modern mentality, but this forces us to look for its deeper meaning, to explain its effective impact.

As the priest places the ashes on the heads of the faithful, he repeats the phrase: "Remember ... you are dust and unto dust you shall return". To return to dust is the fate that human beings and animals seem to have in common. However the human being is not just flesh, but also spirit. If the flesh is destined to become dust, the spirit is made for immortality. In addition, the believer knows that Christ is risen, conquering death in his body. In hope the believer moves toward this future reality.

3. Receiving the ashes on the head, means recognizing that we are creatures, made of earth and destined to return to it (cf. Gn 3,19); it also means proclaiming that we are sinners, in need of God's pardon in order to be able to live according to the Gospel (cf. Mk 1,15); finally, it means reviving our hope in the definitive encounter with Christ in the glory and peace of Heaven.

This prospect of joy obliges believers to do everything possible to anticipate at the present time something of the future peace. This calls for the purification of heart and reinforcing of communion with God and with the brethren. This is the aim of the prayer and fasting to which, in the face of the threats of war looming on the horizon, I have invited the faithful. With prayer, we abandon ourselves totally into God's hands, and from him alone we await true peace. With fasting, we prepare our hearts to receive peace from the Lord, his greatest gift and the privileged sign of the coming of his Kingdom.

4. Prayer and fasting, however, must be accompanied by works of justice; conversion must be translated into welcome and solidarity. The ancient Prophet warns: "Is not this the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of wickedness, / to undo the thongs of the yoke, / to let the oppressed go free, /and to break every yoke?" (Is 58,6).

There will be no peace on earth while the oppression of peoples, social injustices and existing economic imbalances continue. Yet for the great and hoped for structural changes, extrinsic initiatives and mediations are not enough; above all, we need the unanimous conversion of hearts to love.

5. "Return to me with all your heart" (Jl 2,12). We could say that the message of today's celebration is compressed into God's heartfelt exhortation to conversion.

The Apostle Paul repeats the invitation in the second reading: "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.... Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation!" (II Cor 5,20; 6,2).

Dear brothers and sisters, now is the favourable time to review our attitude toward God and our brothers and sisters!

This is the day of salvation on which to examine in depth the criteria that guide us in our daily behaviour.

Help us, Lord, to return with all our heart to you, the Way that leads to salvation, the Truth that sets us free, the Life that knows no death!