



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 17 February 2010*

Ash Wednesday

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, Ash Wednesday, we are beginning the Lenten Journey, a journey that takes 40 days and brings us to the joy of the Lord's Pasch. On this spiritual journey we are not alone because the Church accompanies and supports us from the outset with the word of God, which contains a programme of spiritual life and penitential commitment, and with the grace of the sacraments.

The Apostle Paul's words give us a precise order "We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.... Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6: 1-2). Indeed in the Christian vision of life every moment must be favourable and every day must be a day of salvation but the Church's Liturgy speaks of this in a very special way in the Season of Lent. And we can understand that the 40 days in preparation for Easter are a favourable time and a time of grace precisely from the appeal that the austere rite of the imposition of ashes addresses to us and which is expressed in the Liturgy in two formulas: "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel"; "Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return".

The first appeal is for conversion, a word to be understood with its extraordinary gravity, grasping the surprising newness it releases. The appeal to conversion, in fact, lays bare and denounces the facile superficiality that all too often marks our lives. To repent [or convert] is to change direction in

the journey of life: not, however, by means of a small adjustment, but with a true and proper about turn. Conversion means swimming against the tide, where the "tide" is the superficial lifestyle, inconsistent and deceptive, that often sweeps us long, overwhelms us and makes us slaves to evil or at any rate prisoners of moral mediocrity. With conversion, on the other hand, we are aiming for the high standard of Christian living, we entrust ourselves to the living and personal Gospel which is Jesus Christ. He is our final goal and the profound meaning of conversion, he is the path on which all are called to walk through life, letting themselves be illumined by his light and sustained by his power which moves our steps. In this way conversion expresses his most splendid and fascinating Face: it is not a mere moral decision that rectifies our conduct in life, but rather a choice of faith that wholly involves us in close communion with Jesus as a real and living Person. To repent and believe in the Gospel are not two different things or in some way only juxtaposed, but express the same reality. Repentance is the total "yes" of those who consign their whole life to the Gospel responding freely to Christ who first offers himself to humankind as the Way, the Truth and the Life, as the only One who sets us free and saves us. This is the precise meaning of the first words with which, according to the Evangelist Mark, Jesus begins preaching the "Gospel of God": "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1: 15).

The "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" is not only at the beginning of Christian life but accompanies it throughout, endures, is renewed and spreads, branching out into all its expressions. Every day is a favourable moment of grace because every day presses us to give ourselves to Jesus, to trust in him, to abide in him, to share his lifestyle, to learn true love from him, to follow him in the daily fulfilment of the Father's will, the one great law of life. Every day, even when it is fraught with difficulties and toil, weariness and setbacks, even when we are tempted to leave the path of the following of Christ and withdraw into ourselves, into our selfishness, without realizing our need to open ourselves to the love of God in Christ, to live the same logic of justice and love. In my recent [Message for Lent](#) I wanted to recall that "humility is required to accept that I need Another to free me from 'what is mine', to give me gratuitously 'what is His'. This happens especially in the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Thanks to Christ's action, we may enter into the 'greatest' justice, which is that of love (cf. Rom 13: 8-10), the justice that recognizes itself in every case more a debtor than a creditor, because it has received more than could ever have been expected" ([Message, 30 October 2009](#)).

The favourable moment of grace in Lent also reveals its spiritual significance to us in the ancient formula: "Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return" which the priest says as he places a little ash on our foreheads. Thus we are referred back to the dawn of human history when the Lord told Adam, after the original sin: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3: 19). Here, the word of God reminds us of our frailty, indeed of our death, which is the extreme form. Before the innate fear of the end and even sooner in the context of a culture which in so many ways tends to censure the reality and the human experience of death, the Lenten Liturgy, on

the one hand, reminds us of death, inviting us to realism and wisdom; but, on the other, it impels us above all to understand and live the unexpected newness that the Christian faith releases from the reality of death itself.

Man is dust and to dust he shall return, but dust is precious in God's eyes because God created man, destining him to immortality. Hence the Liturgical formula, "Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return", finds the fullness of its meaning in reference to the new Adam, Christ. The Lord Jesus also chose freely to share with every human being the destiny of weakness, in particular through his death on the Cross; but this very death, the culmination of his love for the Father and for humanity, was the way to the glorious Resurrection, through which Christ became a source of grace, given to all who believe in him, who are made to share in divine life itself. This life that will have no end has already begun in the earthly phase of our existence but it will be brought to completion after "the resurrection of the flesh". The little action of the imposition of ashes reveals to us the unique riches of its meaning. It is an invitation to spend the Lenten Season as a more conscious and intense immersion in Christ's Paschal Mystery in his death and Resurrection, through participation in the Eucharist and in the life of charity, which is born from the Eucharist in which it also finds its fulfilment. With the imposition of ashes we renew our commitment to following Jesus, to letting ourselves be transformed by his Paschal Mystery, to overcoming evil and to doing good, in order to make our former self, linked to sin die and to give birth to our "new nature", transformed by God's grace.

Dear friends, while we prepare to set out on the austere [Lenten journey](#), let us invoke with special trust the protection and help of the Virgin Mary. May it be her, the first believer in Christ, to accompany us in these 40 days of intense prayer and sincere penitence so that we may arrive purified and completely renewed in mind and in spirit at the great Mystery of the Pasch of his Son.

I wish you all a good [Lent](#)!

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I welcome all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland and the United States. My special greeting goes to the members of the Movement *Pro Sanctitate* from Lithuania, led by Bishop Antons Justs. I also greet the many school and university students, including those from Bishop Hendrickson High School in Rhode Island, and I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

In a special way I greet with affection the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young*

people I urge you to live Lent with an authentic penitential spirit, as a return to the Father who awaits all with open arms. Dear *sick people*, I encourage you to offer up your suffering together with Christ for the conversion of all who are still far from God; and I hope that you, dear *newlyweds*, may build your family courageously and generously on the firm rock of divine love.

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