



The Holy See

"STATIO" AND PENITENTIAL PROCESSION

FROM THE CHURCH OF ST ANSELM

TO THE BASILICA OF ST SABINA ON THE AVENTINE HILL

HOLY MASS, BLESSING AND IMPOSITION OF THE ASHES

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Basilica of St Sabina

Ash Wednesday , 17 February 2010

[Images of the celebration](#)

"Lord, you are merciful to all, and hate nothing you have created.
You overlook the sins of men to bring them to repentance.
You are the Lord our God" (*Entrance Antiphon*).

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With this moving invocation from the Book of Wisdom (cf. 11: 23-26), the Liturgy opens the Eucharistic Celebration of Ash Wednesday. In a certain way, these words introduce the entire Lenten journey; they establish the omnipotence of God's love as the basis, his absolute dominion over every creature which is expressed in infinite forgiveness and animated by the constant, universal desire for life. Indeed, forgiving someone is equivalent to telling him or her: I do not want you to die, but to live; I always and only want the best for you.

This absolute certainty sustained Jesus during the 40 days he spent in the Judean desert, after he had received Baptism from John in the Jordan. For him that long period of silence and fasting was a complete abandonment of himself to the Father and to his plan of love. The time was a "baptism" in itself, that is, an "immersion" in God's will and in this sense a foretaste of the Passion and of the Cross. Going out into the desert alone to remain there at length meant exposing himself

willingly to the assaults of the enemy, the tempter who brought about Adam's fall and whose envy caused death to enter the world (cf. Wis 2: 24). It meant engaging in battle with him, with nothing but the weapon of boundless faith to challenge him, in the omnipotent love of the Father. Your love is enough for me, my food is to do your will (cf. Jn 4: 34): this conviction pervaded Jesus' mind and heart during his time of "Lent". It was neither an act of pride nor a titanic undertaking but rather a humble choice, consistent with the Incarnation and the Baptism in the Jordan, in the same vein of obedience to the merciful love of the Father, who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3: 16).

Our Lord Jesus did all this for us. He did it to save us, and at the same time to show us the path on which to follow him. Salvation is in fact a gift; it is the grace of God, but in order for it to make an impact on my life it requires my assent, an acceptance that is demonstrated in my actions in other words, the will to live like Jesus, to follow him. Following Jesus into the Lenten desert is therefore a prerequisite for participating in his Pasch, in his "exodus". Adam was banished from the earthly Paradise, a symbol of communion with God. Now, in order to return to this communion and thus to true life, to eternal life, it is necessary to cross the desert, the trial of faith not alone, but with Jesus! He has preceded us, as always, and has already won the battle against the spirit of evil. This is the meaning of Lent, the liturgical Season that every year invites us to renew our decision to follow Christ on the path of humility, in order to take part in his victory over sin and death.

In this perspective one can also understand the penitential symbol of the ashes, which are placed upon the heads of all those who begin the Lenten journey with good will. It is essentially an act of humility that means: I recognize myself for what I am, a frail creature, made from earth and destined to return to earth, yet also made in the image of God and destined for him. I am dust, yes, but also beloved, shaped by his love, animated by his vital breath, able to recognize his voice and respond to him. I am free and therefore capable of disobeying him, of giving in to the temptation of pride and self-sufficiency. This is sin, the deadly illness that came so soon to pollute the blessed earth that is the human being. Created in the image of the Holy and the Just, man lost his own innocence. Now he can only return to being just by the grace of God's justice, the justice of love that, as St Paul writes, "has been manifested... through faith in Jesus Christ" (cf. Rom 3: 21-22). These words of the Apostle provided an inspiration for the Message I addressed to all the faithful for this Lent, which is a reflection on the theme of justice in the light of the Sacred Scriptures and their fulfilment in Christ.

The theme of justice is also very present in Ash Wednesday's biblical readings. First, the passage from the prophet Joel and the Responsorial Psalm the *Miserere* form a penitential diptych. This highlights what the Bible calls "iniquity" that is, sin, which fundamentally consists in disobeying God, which means a lack of love as the origin of every material and social injustice. "For I know my transgressions", the Psalmist confesses, "and my sin is ever before me. / Against you, you only, have I sinned, / and done that which is evil in your sight" (Ps 51[50]: 3-4 [rsv]). The first act of

justice is therefore recognizing one's own iniquity and realizing that it is rooted in the "heart", at the very core of the human person. The "fasting", "weeping" and "mourning" (cf. Jl 2: 12), and any other expression of penitence only have value in God's eyes if they are signs of sincerely repentant hearts.

The Gospel, too, taken from the "Sermon on the Mount", insists on the need to practice one's own "justice" almsgiving, prayer, fasting so that it may not be seen by men but only by the eyes of God, who "sees in secret" (cf. Mt 6: 1-6, 16-18). The true "reward" is not the admiration of others but rather friendship with God and the grace that derives from it, a grace that gives peace and strength to do good, to love even those who are not worthy, to forgive those who have offended us.

The Second Reading, Paul's appeal to be reconciled to God (cf. 2 Cor 5: 20), contains one of the celebrated Pauline paradoxes, which leads to the whole reflection on justice in the mystery of Christ. St Paul writes, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin" that is, his Son made Man "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5: 21). In Christ's heart, in other words at the core of his divine and human Person, the entire drama of freedom was played out in decisive and definitive terms. God took his own plan of salvation to extreme consequences, remaining faithful in his love even at the price of sending his only Son to death, to death on the Cross. As I wrote in my [Lenten Message](#), "Here we discover divine justice, which is so profoundly different from its human counterpart.... Thanks to Christ's action, we may enter into the 'greatest' justice, which is that of love (cf. Rom 13: 8-10)".

Dear brothers and sisters, [Lent](#) broadens our horizons; it orients us to eternal life. On this earth we are on a pilgrimage: "Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come", according to the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 13: 14). [Lent](#) shows us the relativity of the goods of this earth, thus rendering us capable of the necessary sacrifices and free to do good. Let us open our world to the light of Heaven, to the presence of God among us. Amen.

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