



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, 22 February 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

[Photo Gallery](#)

*Venerable Brothers,
Dear Brothers and Sisters*

With this day of penance and fasting — Ash Wednesday — we are beginning a new journey to the Resurrection at Easter: the journey of Lent. I would like to reflect briefly on the liturgical symbol of Ashes, a material sign, a natural element, which in the liturgy becomes a sacred symbol, very important on this day which marks the beginning of the [Lenten journey](#). In ancient times, in the Jewish culture, it was common practice to sprinkle ashes on one's head as a sign of penance, and often also to dress in sack-cloth or rags. Instead, for us Christians this is a special moment which has considerable ritual and spiritual importance.

Firstly, ashes are one of the material signs that bring the cosmos into the Liturgy. The most important signs are those of the Sacraments: water, oil, bread and wine, which become true sacramental elements through which we receive the grace of Christ which comes among us. The ashes are not a sacramental sign, but are nevertheless linked to prayer and the sanctification of the Christian people. In fact, before the distribution of ashes on the heads of each one of us — which we will soon do — they are blessed according to two possible formulas: in the first, they are

called “austere symbols”, in the second, we invoke a blessing directly upon them, referring to the text in the Book of Genesis which can also accompany the act of the imposition: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (cf. Gen 3:19).

Let us reflect for a moment on this passage of Genesis. It concludes with a judgement God delivered after the original sin. God curses the serpent who caused man and woman to sin. Then he punishes the woman telling her that she will give birth with great pain and will have a biased relationship with her husband. Then he punishes the man, saying he will toil and labour and curses the ground saying “cursed is the ground because of you” (Gen 3:17) because of your sin. Therefore, the man and woman are not cursed directly as the serpent is, but because of Adam’s sin; cursed is the ground from which he was taken. Let us reread the magnificent account of how God created man from the Earth. “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed” (Gen 2:7-8); taken from the Book of Genesis.

Thus the sign of the Ashes recalls the great fresco of creation which tells us that the human being is a singular unity of matter and of the Divine breath, using the image of dust moulded by God and given life by the breath breathed into the nostrils of the new creature.

In Genesis, the symbol of dust takes on a negative connotation because of sin. Whereas before the fall the soil was a totally good element, irrigated by spring water (cf. Gen 2:6) and through God’s work was capable of producing “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:9).

After the fall and the divine curse it was to produce only “thorns and thistles”, and only in exchange for the “toil” and the “sweat of your face” would it bear fruit (cf. Gen 3:17-19). The dust of the earth no longer recalls the creative hand of God, one that is open to life, but becomes a sign of an inexorable destiny of death: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19).

It is clear in this Biblical text that the earth participates in man’s destiny. In one of his homilies, St John Chrysostom says: “See how after his disobedience, everything is imposed on man in a way that is contrary to his previous style of life” (*Sermones in Genesis* 17:9: PG 53, 146). This cursing of the ground has a “medicinal” function for man who learns from the earth’s “resistance” to recognize his limitations and his own human nature (*ibid.*).

Another ancient commentary summarizes this beautifully, saying: “Adam was created pure by God to serve him. All creatures were created for the service of man. He was destined to be lord and king over all creatures. But when he embraced evil he did so by listening to something outside himself. This penetrated his heart and took over his whole being. Thus ensnared by evil, Creation, which had assisted and served him, was ensnared together with him” (Pseudo-Macarius, *Homily*

11, 5: PG 34, 547).

As we said earlier, quoting St John Chrysostom, the cursing of the ground has a “medicinal” function: meaning that God’s intention is always good and more profound than the curse. The curse, indeed, does not come from God but from sin. God cannot avoid inflicting it, because he respects man’s freedom and its consequences, even when they are negative. Thus, within the punishment and within the curse of the ground, there is a good intention that comes from God. When he says to man, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return”, together with the just punishment, he also intends to announce the way to salvation, which will pass precisely through the earth, through that “dust”, that “flesh” which will be assumed by the [Incarnate] Word.

It is in this salvific perspective that the words of Genesis are repeated in the Ash Wednesday Liturgy: as an invitation to penance, humility, and to have an awareness of our mortal state, not to end in despair, but rather to welcome in this mortal state of ours the unthinkable closeness of God who beyond death, opens the way to resurrection, to paradise finally regained. There is a similar text by Origen that says: “What was initially flesh, from the earth, a man of dust (cf. 1 Cor 15:47), and was destroyed by death and returned to dust and ashes — as is written: *you are dust, and to dust you shall return* — is made to rise again from the earth. Later, according to the merits of the soul that inhabits the body, the person advances towards the glory of a spiritual body” (*Sui Principi* 3, 6, 5: *S.Ch.*, 268, 248).

The “merits of the soul” of which Origen speaks, are necessary; the merits of Christ, the efficacy of his Paschal Mystery are fundamental. St Paul has summed it for us in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, today’s Second Reading: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:11). Our possibility of receiving divine forgiveness depends essentially on the fact that God himself, in the person of his Son, wished to share in our human condition, but not in the corruption of sin.

The Father raised him through the power of his Holy Spirit and Jesus, the new Adam, became, as St Paul says: “a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45), the first fruits of the new creation.

The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead can turn our hearts from hearts of stone into hearts of flesh (cf. Ezek 36:26). We invoked him just now in the Psalm *Miserere*: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy Spirit from me” (Ps 51[50]:10, 11). That same God who banished our first parents from Eden, sent his own Son to this earth, devastated by sin, without sparing him, so that we, as prodigal children might return, repentant and redeemed through his mercy, to our true homeland. So may it be for all of us, for all believers, and for all those who humbly recognize their need for salvation. Amen.

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