



# The Holy See

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POPE JOHN PAUL II

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday, 12 February 1997*

### ***'Repent and believe in the Gospel'***

1. Today, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, we begin our journey of preparation for Easter. It is a spiritual journey of prayer and penance, by which Christians let themselves be purified and sanctified by the Lord, who wants them to share in his sufferings and his glory (cf. Rom 8:17).

The Holy Spirit, who led and sustained Christ in the "desert", leads us into this season of Lent, giving us the necessary grace to resist the seductions of the ancient tempter and to live with renewed commitment in the freedom of God's children.

In fact, Jesus does not ask for formal observances and mere external change, but for conversion of heart and decisive adherence to the will of his Father and our Father.

In this Lenten season, Jesus calls us to follow him on the way that leads him to Jerusalem to be sacrificed on the Cross. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). Of course, this is a demanding and difficult invitation, but it can unleash the creative power of love in those who accept it.

From the first moment of this season of Lent, therefore, our gaze is turned to Christ's glorious Cross. The author of the *Imitation of Christ* writes: "In the Cross is salvation; in the Cross is life; in the Cross is protection from the enemy; in the Cross is the supernatural gift of the sweetness of heaven; in the Cross is strength of mind and joy of spirit; in the Cross virtue is added to virtue and holiness is perfected" (XII, 1).

2. "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:14). As we receive ashes on our heads, we listen again today to this passage from the Evangelist Mark. It reminds us that the salvation offered by

Jesus in his paschal mystery requires our response.

Thus the liturgy urges us to give concrete and visible expression to the gift of conversion of heart, showing to us the way to take and the means to use. Attentive listening to God's Word, constant prayer, interior and exterior fasting, works of charity that concretely express our solidarity with our brothers and sisters: these matters cannot be avoided by those who, reborn to new life in Baptism, no longer intend to live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:4).

I also referred in this year's *Lenten Message* to solidarity with our brothers and sisters: Lent "becomes a season of solidarity with individuals and peoples in so many parts of the world who find themselves in very difficult situations" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 5 February 1997, p. 1). Among these difficult situations, I gave particular emphasis to the tragic plight of the homeless.

3. This year the Lenten season is part of the three-year journey of immediate preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. The first stage of this journey, 1997, is "devoted to reflection on Christ, the Word of God, made man by the power of the Holy Spirit" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 40). During this year we are all invited to a deeper discovery of the person of Christ, the Saviour and Evangelizer, in order to renew our loyalty to him.

Just as the crowds in the Gospel were amazed at the actions and teachings of Jesus, so today humanity will be more easily attracted by Christ and will choose him if they are touched by the witness of Christian faith and charity. Through the work of the Church, the Lord continues to call men and women to follow him.

4. May the Blessed Virgin accompany us on the way of conversion and repentance we have just begun. May her motherly help spur us to overcome all laziness and fear, and to advance with intrepid faith towards Calvary, knowing how to pause lovingly beneath the Cross, in the joyful hope of sharing in the glory of the Lord's Resurrection.

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

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking visitors, especially the pilgrims from Ireland and the United States. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you I cordially invoke God's abundant blessings of grace and peace.

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