



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Ash Wednesday 13 February 2002

1. The general audience today, Ash Wednesday, is characterized by a special spirit of prayer, reflection and penitence. With the whole Church we begin a 40-day journey in preparation for Easter, with the austere sign of the imposition of ashes coupled with the word of Christ: "Repent and believe in the Gospel". The Church reminds every human being of his condition as sinner and the need for repentance and conversion.

Christian faith reminds us that this pressing call to reject evil and to do good is the gift of God, from whom comes every good thing for human life. Everything begins with the free initiative of God, who creates us for happiness and directs everything towards its true good. With his grace, he precedes our own desire of conversion and he accompanies our efforts to adhere fully to his saving will.

2. In this year's [Lenten Message](#), published a few days ago, I wished to indicate to the whole Catholic world the theme of the free giftedness (*gratuità*) of the initiative of God in our lives, an essential element of the whole Biblical revelation. Lent is "a providential time for conversion", because it "helps us to contemplate this stupendous mystery of love" on account of which Jesus exhorts us: "*You received without paying, give without pay*" (Mt 10,8). We can see how the Lenten journey is shown in its deepest reality as "a return to the roots of our faith, so that by pondering the measureless gift of grace which is Redemption, we cannot fail to realize that all has been given to us by God's loving initiative" ([Message for Lent](#), n. 1, *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, n. 6, 6 February 2002, p. 1).

The Apostle Paul expresses with incisive and timely phrases the free giftedness (*gratuità*) of the grace of God, who reconciled us with himself out of love. In fact he reminds us: "*Why one will*

hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5,7-8). That God who in his immense love created us, and who also out of love destined us to full communion with himself, awaits from us a similar generous, free and conscious response.

3. The journey of conversion, that we confidently undertake today, enters fully into this original exchange of love and free gift (*gratuità*). Are not the almsgiving and the charitable activity which we are invited to perform, particularly during this season of penance, a response to the free gift (*gratuità*) of divine grace? If we have received a free gift, it is with a free gift that we should give back (cf. Mt 10,8).

Today's society has a deep need to rediscover the positive value of free giving (*gratuità*), especially because in our world what often prevails is a logic motivated exclusively by the pursuit of profit and gain at any price. Reacting to the widespread feeling that the logic of the market's profit motive guides every choice and act, and that the law of the greatest possible profit must prevail, Christian faith proposes again the idea of free giving, founded on the intelligent freedom of human beings inspired by authentic love.

We entrust these forty days of intense prayer and penance to the Virgin Mary, the "Mother of Fair Love". May she guide us and lead us to celebrate worthily the great mystery of the Passover of Christ, supreme revelation of the free and merciful love of our heavenly Father.

At the end of his talk, the Holy Father then gave a summary to the pilgrims in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Flemish, Slovak, and Italian. He greeted the English-speaking pilgrims.

I warmly welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today, especially those from England and the United States of America. May these days of Lent be a time of renewal and blessing for you all!