



# The Holy See

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LENTEN STATION PRESIDED OVER BY THE HOLY FATHER  
IN THE BASILICA OF ST. SABINA ON THE AVENTINE HILL

## *HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II*

*Wednesday, 28 February 1979*

1. "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting...

Return to the Lord, your God! (Joel 2:12, 13).

Today we announce Lent with the words of the prophet Joel, and we begin it with the whole Church. We announce Lent of the Year of the Lord 1979 with the rite that is even more eloquent than the words of the prophet. Today the Church blesses the ashes, obtained from the branches blessed on Palm Sunday last year, to sprinkle them on each of us. So let us bow our heads and in the sign of the ashes recognize the whole truth of the words addressed by God to the first man: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19).

Yes! We can remember this reality particularly during the time of Lent, to which the liturgy of the Church brings us today. It is a stern time. In this period, divine truths must speak to our hearts with particular forcefulness. We must meet our human experience, our conscience. The first truth, proclaimed today, reminds man of his transience, recalls death, which is for each of us the end of earthly life. Today the Church lays great stress on this truth, confirmed by the history of every man. Remember that "to dust you shall return". Remember that your life on earth has a limit!

2. But the message of Ash Wednesday does not end here. The whole of today's liturgy warns: Remember that limit; and at the same time: do not stop at that limit! Death is not only a "natural" necessity. Death is a mystery. Here we enter the particular time in which the whole Church, more than ever, wishes to meditate on death as the mystery of man in Christ. Christ the Son of God accepted death as a natural necessity, as an inevitable part of man's fate on earth. Jesus Christ accepted death as the consequence of sin. Right from the beginning death was united with sin: the

death of the body (“to dust you shall return”) and the death of the human spirit owing to disobedience to God, to the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ accepted death as a sign of obedience to God, in order to restore to the human spirit the full gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ accepted death to overcome sin. Jesus Christ accepted death to overcome death in the very essence of its perennial mystery.

3. Therefore the message of Ash Wednesday is expressed with the words of St. Paul: “We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 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 5:20-21). Collaborate with him!

The significance of Ash Wednesday is not limited to remind us of death and sin; it is also a loud call to overcome sin, to be converted. Both of these express collaboration with Christ. During Lent we have before our eyes the whole divine “economy” of grace and salvation”. In this time of Lent let us remember “not to accept the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor 6:1).

Jesus Christ himself is the most sublime grace of Lent. It is he himself who appears before us in the admirable simplicity of the Gospel, of its words and its works. He speaks to us with the might of his Gethsemane, of the judgment before Pilate, of the scourging, of the crowning with thorns, of the *via crucis*, of his crucifixion: with everything that can shake man’s heart.

In this period of Lent the whole Church wishes to be specially united with Christ, in order that his preaching and his service may be even more fruitful. “Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2).

4. Filled with the depth of today’s liturgy, I, John Paul II, Bishop of Rome, with all my Brothers and Sisters in the one faith of your Church, with all my Brothers and Sisters of the immense human family, say to you, Christ: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit” (Ps 51).

“Then the Lord became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people” (Joel 2:18). Amen.

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