



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF THE WORD IN ST PETER'S BASILICA

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Ash Wednesday, 25 February 2004

1. *"Your Father who sees in secret will reward you"* (Mt 6: 4, 6, 18). Jesus' words are addressed to each one of us at the beginning of our Lenten journey. We begin it with the imposition of ashes, an austere penitential gesture very dear to Christian tradition. It emphasizes the awareness of sinners as they stand before the majesty and holiness of God. At the same time, it demonstrates readiness to accept and to transform into concrete choices adherence to the Gospel.

The formulas that accompany it are very eloquent. The first, from the Book of Genesis: *"You are dust and to dust you shall return"* (Gen 3: 19), calls to mind the present human condition, marked by transitoriness and limitation. The second one takes up the words of the Gospel: *"Repent and believe in the Gospel"* (Mk 1: 15), which are a pressing appeal to change one's life. Both these formulas invite us to enter Lent in an attitude of listening and sincere conversion.

2. The Gospel emphasizes that the Lord *"sees in secret"*, that is, he scrutinizes our hearts. The external gestures of penance are valuable if they are an expression of an inner attitude and demonstrate the firm determination to shun evil and to take the path of righteousness. This is *the profound sense of Christian asceticism*.

"Asceticism": the very word evokes the image of ascending to lofty heights. This necessarily entails sacrifices and renunciation. Indeed, to make the journey easier, one must be reduced to the bare essentials; to be prepared to face every hardship and overcome every obstacle in order to reach the pre-established goal. To become authentic disciples of Christ, it is necessary to deny oneself, take up one's cross and follow him (cf. Lk 9: 23). This is the arduous path to holiness that every baptized person is called to follow.

3. The Church has always pointed out certain useful means for taking this route. They consist above all in humble and docile *adherence to God's will* accompanied by ceaseless *prayer*; they are the *typical forms of penance* of Christian tradition, such as abstinence, fasting, mortification and giving up even good things legitimate in themselves; they are the *concrete acts of acceptance* of our neighbour that are referred to in today's Gospel with the term "giving alms". All these things are suggested once again but with greater intensity during the season of Lent, which in this regard is a "strong moment" for spiritual training and generous service to our brothers and sisters. Who needs protection more than a frail, defenceless child?

4. In my *Lenten Message*, by recalling Christ's words: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Mt 18: 5), I wanted to draw special attention to the difficult conditions in which so many of the world's children live. Indeed, who needs to be defended and protected more than a frail and defenceless little child?

The world of childhood is beset by many complex problems. I warmly hope that our solidarity will mean that proper care is given to these, the smallest of our brethren, who are often left to themselves. This is a concrete way of expressing our Lenten resolve.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us begin Lent with these sentiments: it is *a journey of prayer, penance and genuine Christian asceticism*. May Mary, Mother of Christ, go with us. May her example and intercession help us to proceed joyfully on our way towards Easter.

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