



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE CHURCH OF ROME FOR LENT

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. The Church is beginning Lent. As every year, we are entering this period, beginning from Ash Wednesday, in order to prepare, for forty days, for the Sacred Triduum of the passion, the death and the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It also refers to that forty days of fasting, which in Christ's earthly life was the introduction to the revelation of his mission as Messiah and Redeemer. During Lent, the Church wishes to animate herself by accepting with particular commitment the mission of her Lord and Master in all its salvific value. Therefore she listens with the utmost attention to the words of Christ, who, independently of the unfolding of temporal matters in the various fields of human life, proclaims immutably the Kingdom of God. And his last word is the Cross on Mount Calvary: that is, the sacrifice offered by his love in order to reconcile man with God. In the time of Lent we must all look to the Cross with special attention in order to understand afresh its eloquence. We cannot see in it only a memory of the events that happened about two thousand years ago. We must understand the teaching of the Cross as it speaks to our times, to modern man: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever." (Heb 13:8.) In the Cross of Jesus Christ there is expressed an intense call to *metanoia*, to conversion: "repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). And we must accept this call as addressed to one and all of us especially on the occasion of the period of Lent. To live Lent means conversion to God by means of Jesus Christ.

2. Christ himself indicates to us in the gospel the rich programme of conversion. Christ—and, after him, the Church—also proposes to us, in the time of Lent, the means that serve for this conversion. It is a question in the first place of prayer; then of almsdeeds and of fasting. We must accept these means and introduce them into our lives in proportion to the needs and possibilities of man and of the Christian of our times. Prayer always remains the first and fundamental condition of approach to God. During Lent we must pray, we must make an effort to pray more, to look for the time and the place to pray. It is prayer in the first place that brings us out of

indifference and makes us sensitive to the things of God and of the soul. Prayer also educates our consciences, and Lent is a particularly suitable time to reawaken and educate conscience. Just in this period the Church reminds us of the indispensable necessity of sacramental confession, in order that we all may be able to live the resurrection of Christ not only in the liturgy, but also in our own soul. Almsdeeds and fasting as means of conversion and of Christian repentance are closely connected with each other. Fasting means self-mastery; it means being demanding with regard to ourselves; being ready to renounce things—and not just food—but also enjoyment and the various pleasures. And almsdeeds—in the wider and essential acceptance—means readiness to share joys and sadness with others, to give to one's neighbour, to the needy in particular; to share not only material goods, but also the gifts of the spirit. And it is just for this reason that we must open to others, feel their different needs, sufferings and misfortunes, and seek—not only in our resources, but above all in our hearts, in our way of behaving and acting—the means to prevent their needs or to bring relief to their sufferings and misfortunes.

In this way, therefore, addressing God by means of prayer, we at the same time address man. Being demanding with ourselves and generous with others, we express our conversion in a way that is both concrete and social. Through fuller solidarity with men, with the suffering and especially with the needy, we unite with the suffering and crucified Christ.

3. We enter, then, the Lenten period in conformity with the centuries-old tradition of the Church. We enter this time in conformity with the particular tradition of the Church of Rome. The generations of disciples and confessors of Christ who have borne to him here an extraordinary witness of faithfulness, not sparing even their own blood, are looking at us. Their catacombs and the most ancient sanctuaries of Rome remind us of them. The whole history of the Eternal City recalls them. We are entering this period, beginning from Ash Wednesday, the day on which the Church sprinkles the ashes on our heads, as a sign of the precariousness of our body and of our temporal existence, admonishing us in the liturgy: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." Let us accept this penitential sign humbly in order that the mystery of the crucified and risen Christ may be renewed, with all the more forcefulness, in the heart and conscience of each of us, that we, too, may "walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4).

From the Vatican, 28 February 1979

JOHN PAUL PP. II

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