



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
BOLLETTINO

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
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N. 170301e

Wednesday 01.03.2017

The Pope imposes the ashes at the Basilica of St. Sabina: to experience Lent is to yearn for the breath of life our Father offers us amid the mire of our history

Today, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, the Holy Father presided at the prayer meeting which, following the form of the Roman “stations”, took place in the Basilicas of St. Anselm and St. Sabina, both situated on the Aventine Hill.

The event began at 4.30 p.m. in St. Anselm; after prayer, the Pope, the cardinals, the bishops and the archbishops along with the Benedictine nuns of St. Anselm and the Dominican fathers of St. Sabina, and a number of faithful, made a penitential procession towards St. Sabina where the Holy Father presided at the celebration of the Eucharist and the rite of the blessing and imposition of the ashes.

The following is the full text of the Pope’s homily, pronounced following the Gospel reading:

“Return to me with all your heart... return to the Lord” (Jl 2:12, 13). The prophet Joel makes this plea to the people in the Lord’s name. No one should feel excluded: “Assemble the aged, gather the children, even infants at the breast, the bridegroom... and the bride” (v. 16). All the faithful people are summoned to come and worship their God, “for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (v. 13).

We too want to take up this appeal; we want to return to the merciful heart of the Father. In this season of grace that begins today, we once again turn our eyes to his mercy. Lent is a path: it leads to the triumph of mercy over all that would crush us or reduce us to something unworthy of our dignity as God’s children. Lent is the road leading from slavery to freedom, from suffering to joy, from death to life. The mark of the ashes with which we set out reminds us of our origin: we were taken from the earth, we are made of dust. True, yet we are dust in the loving hands of God, who has breathed his spirit of life upon each one of us, and still wants to do so. He wants to keep giving us that breath of life that saves us from every other type of breath: the stifling asphyxia brought on by our selfishness, the stifling asphyxia generated by petty ambition and silent indifference – an asphyxia that smothers the spirit, narrows our horizons and slows the beating of our hearts. The breath of God’s life saves us from this asphyxia that dampens our faith, cools our charity and strangles every hope. To experience Lent is to

yearn for this breath of life that our Father unceasingly offers us amid the mire of our history.

The breath of God's life sets us free from the asphyxia that so often we fail to notice, or become so used to that it seems normal, even when its effects are felt. We think it is normal because we have grown so accustomed to breathing air in which hope has dissipated, the air of glumness and resignation, the stifling air of panic and hostility.

Lent is the time for saying no. No to the spiritual asphyxia born of the pollution caused by indifference, by thinking that other people's lives are not my concern, and by every attempt to trivialize life, especially the lives of those whose flesh is burdened by so much superficiality. Lent means saying no to the toxic pollution of empty and meaningless words, of harsh and hasty criticism, of simplistic analyses that fail to grasp the complexity of problems, especially the problems of those who suffer the most. Lent is the time to say no to the asphyxia of a prayer that soothes our conscience, of an almsgiving that leaves us self-satisfied, of a fasting that makes us feel good. Lent is the time to say no to the asphyxia born of relationships that exclude, that try to find God while avoiding the wounds of Christ present in the wounds of his brothers and sisters: in a word, all those forms of spirituality that reduce the faith to a ghetto culture, a culture of exclusion.

Lent is a time for remembering. It is the time to reflect and ask ourselves what we would be if God had closed his doors to us. What would we be without his mercy that never tires of forgiving us and always gives us the chance to begin anew? Lent is the time to ask ourselves where we would be without the help of so many people who in a thousand quiet ways have stretched out their hands and in very concrete ways given us hope and enabled us to make a new beginning?

Lent is the time to start breathing again. It is the time to open our hearts to the breath of the One capable of turning our dust into humanity. It is not the time to rend our garments before the evil all around us, but instead to make room in our life for all the good we are able to do. It is a time to set aside everything that isolates us, encloses us and paralyzes us. Lent is a time of compassion, when, with the Psalmist, we can say: "Restore to us the joy of your salvation, sustain in us a willing spirit", so that by our lives we may declare your praise (cf. Ps 51:12.15), and our dust – by the power of your breath of life - may become a "dust of love".
