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SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

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Penitential Procession and Holy Mass with the Rite of the Blessing and Imposition of the Ashes

This afternoon, Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, a celebration took place in the form of the Roman "Stations".

At 16.30, in the Church of Sant'Anselmo all'Aventino, a moment of prayer was held, followed by the penitential procession towards the Basilica of Santa Sabina. The cardinals, archbishops, bishops, Benedictine monks of Sant'Anselmo, the Dominican Fathers of Santa Sabina and some took part.

At the end of the procession, in the Basilica of Santa Sabina, the Holy Father Francis presided over the celebration of Holy Mass with the Rite of the blessing and imposition of the ashes.

The following is the homily delivered by the Pope after the proclamation of the Holy Gospel:

Homily of the Holy Father

When you give alms, or pray or fast, take care to do these things *in secret*, for your Father sees in secret (cf. Mt 6:4). "Go into your room": this is the invitation that Jesus addresses to each of us at the beginning of the Lenten journey.

Going into your inner room means returning to the *heart*, as the prophet Joel admonishes (cf. Joel 2:12). It means journeying from without to within, so that our whole life, including our relationship with God, is not reduced to mere outward show, a frame without a picture, a draping of the soul, but is born from within and reflects the movements of our heart, our deepest desires, our thoughts, our feelings, the very core of our person.

Lent, then, immerses us in a bath of purification and of self-spoilation: it helps us to remove all the cosmetics that we use in order to appear presentable, better than we really are. To return to the heart means to go back to our true self and to present it just as it is, naked and defenceless, in the sight of God. It means looking within

ourselves and acknowledging our real identity, removing the masks we so often wear, slowing the frantic pace of our lives and embracing life and the truth of who we are. Life is not a play; Lent invites us to come down from the stage and return to the heart, to the reality of who we are: a return to the heart and the truth.

That is why this evening, in a spirit of prayer and humility, we receive ashes on our head. This gesture is meant to remind us of the ultimate reality of our lives: that we are dust and our life passes away like a breath (cf. *Ps* 39:6; 144:4). Yet the Lord – he and he alone – does not allow it to vanish; he gathers and shapes the dust that we are, lest it be swept away by the winds of life or sink into the abyss of death.

The ashes placed on our head invite us to rediscover the secret of life. They tell us that as long as we continue to shield our hearts and hide ourselves behind a mask, to appear invincible, we will be empty and arid within. When, on the other hand, we have the courage to bow our heads in order to look within, we will discover the presence of God who loves us and has always loved us. At last those shields you have built for yourself will be shattered and you will be able to feel yourself loved with an eternal love.

Sister, brother, I, you, each of us, is loved with an eternal love. We are ashes on which God has breathed his breath of life, we are the earth which he has shaped with his own hands (cf. *Gen* 2:7; *Ps* 119:73), dust from which we will rise for a life without end prepared for us from all eternity (cf. *Is* 26:9). And if, in the ashes that we are, the fire of the love of God burns, then we will discover that we have indeed been shaped by that love and called to love others in turn. To love the brothers and sisters all around us, to be considerate to others, to feel compassion, to show mercy, to share all that we are and all that we have with those in need. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting are not mere external practices; they are paths that lead to the heart, to the core of the Christian life. They make us realize that we are ashes loved by God, and they enable us to spread that love on the “ashes” of so many situations in our daily lives, so that in them hope, trust and joy may be reborn.

Saint Anselm of Aosta has left us these words of encouragement that this evening we can make our own: “Escape from your everyday business for a short while, hide for a moment from your restless thoughts. Break off from your cares and troubles and be less concerned about your tasks and labours. Make a little time for God and rest a while in him. Enter into your mind’s inner chamber. Shut out everything but God and whatever helps you to seek him; and when you have shut the door, look for him. Speak now to God and say with your whole heart: I seek your face; your face, O Lord, I desire” (*Proslogion*, 1).

Let us listen then, throughout this Lent, to the voice of the Lord who does not tire of repeating: *go to your room*, return to your heart. It is a salutary invitation for us, who so often live on the surface of things, who are so concerned to be noticed, who constantly need to be admired and appreciated. Without realizing it, we find ourselves no longer having an “inner chamber” in which we can stop and care for ourselves, immersed as we are in a world in which everything, including our emotions and deepest feelings, has to become “social” – but how can something be “social” that does not come from the *heart*? Even the most tragic and painful experiences risk not having a quiet place where they can be kept. Everything has to be exposed, shown off, fed to the gossip-mill of the moment. But the Lord says to us: *Enter into the secret*, return to the centre of yourself. Precisely there, where so many fears, feelings of guilt and sin are lurking, precisely there the Lord has descended in order to heal and cleanse you. Let us enter into our inner chamber: there the Lord dwells, there our frailty is accepted and we are loved unconditionally.

Let us return, brothers and sisters. Let us return to God with all our heart. During these weeks of Lent, let us make space for the prayer of silent adoration, in which we experience the presence of the Lord, like Moses, like Elijah, like Mary, like Jesus. Have we noticed that we have lost the sense of worship? Let us return to worship. Let us lend the ear of our hearts to the One who, in silence, wants to say to us: “I am your God – the God of mercy and compassion, the God of pardon and love, the God of tenderness and care... Do not judge yourself. Do not condemn yourself. Do not reject yourself. Let my love touch the deepest, most hidden corners of your heart and reveal to you your own beauty, a beauty that you have lost sight of, but will become visible to you again in the light of my mercy.” The Lord is calling us: “Come, let me wipe your tears, and let my mouth come close to your ear and say to you: I love you, I love you, I love you” (H. NOUWEN, *The Road to Daybreak*, New York, 1988, 157-158). Do we believe that the Lord loves us, that the Lord loves *me*?

Brothers and sisters, let us not be afraid to strip ourselves of worldly trappings and return to the heart, returning to what is essential. Let us think of Saint Francis, who after stripping himself embraced with his entire being the Father in heaven. Let us acknowledge what we are: dust loved by God, called to be dust in love with God. Thanks to him, we will be reborn from the ashes of sin to new life in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit.
