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

This morning – Ash Wednesday, first day of Lent – a celebration was held in the form of the Roman “Stations”:

At 16.30, in the Church of Saint Anselm on the Aventine Hill, a moment of prayer was held, followed by a penitential procession towards the Basilica of Saint Sabina. The cardinals, archbishops, bishops, Benedictine monks of Saint Anselm, the Dominican Fathers of Saint Sabina, and some faithful participated in the procession.

At the end of the procession, in the Basilica of Saint Sabina, the Holy Father Francis presided at 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

“Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation!” (2 Cor 6:2). With these words, the Apostle Paul helps us enter into the spirit of the Lenten season. Lent is indeed the “favourable time” to return to what is essential, to divest ourselves of all that weighs us down, to be reconciled with God, and to rekindle the fire of the Holy Spirit hidden beneath the ashes of our frail humanity. Return to what is essential. It is the season of grace when we put into practice what the Lord asks of us at the beginning of today’s first reading: “Return to me with all your heart” (Jl 2:12). Return to what is essential: it is the Lord.

The rite of the imposition of ashes serves as the beginning of this return journey. It exhorts us to do two things: *to return to the truth about ourselves* and *to return to God and to our brothers and sisters*.

First, *to return to the truth about ourselves*. The ashes remind us who we are and whence we come. They bring us back to the essential truth of our lives: the Lord alone is God and we are the work of his hands. That is the truth of who we are. We *have* life, whereas God *is* life. He is the Creator, while we are the fragile clay fashioned

by his hands. We come from the earth and we need heaven; we need him. With God, we will rise from our ashes, but without him, we are dust. As we humbly bow our heads to receive the ashes, we are reminded of this truth: we are the Lord's; we belong to him. For God "formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (*Gen 2:7*); we exist because he breathed into us the breath of life. As a tender and merciful Father, God too experiences Lent, since he is concerned for us; he waits for us; he awaits our return. And he constantly urges us not to despair, even when we lie fallen in the dust of our weakness and sin, for "he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust" (*Ps 103:14*). Let us listen to those words again: *He remembers that we are dust*. God knows this; yet we often forget it, and think that we are self-sufficient, strong and invincible without him. We put on *maquillage* and think we are better than we really are. We are dust.

Lent, then, is the time to remind ourselves who is the Creator and who is the creature. The time to proclaim that God alone is Lord, to drop the pretense of being self-sufficient and the need to put ourselves at the centre of things, to be the top of the class, to think that by our own abilities we can succeed in life and transform the world around us. Now is the favourable time to be converted, to stop looking at ourselves and to start looking into ourselves. How many distractions and trifles distract us from the things that really count! How often do we get caught up in our own wants and needs, lose sight of the heart of the matter, and fail to embrace the true meaning of our lives in this world! Lent is *a time of truth*, a time to drop the masks we put on each day to appear perfect in the eyes of the world. It is a time, as Jesus said in the Gospel, to reject lies and hypocrisy: not those of others, but of ourselves: We look them in the eye and resist them.

Yet there is a second step: the ashes invite us also to *return to God and to our brothers and sisters*. Once we return to the truth about ourselves and remind ourselves that we are not self-sufficient, we realize that we exist only through relationships: our primordial relationship with the Lord and our vital relationships with others. The ashes we receive this evening tell us that every presumption of self-sufficiency is false and that self-idolatry is destructive, imprisoning us in isolation and loneliness: we look in the mirror and believe that we are perfect, the centre of the world. Life is instead a relationship: we receive it from God and from our parents, and we can always revive and renew it thanks to the Lord and to those he puts at our side. Lent, then, is a season of grace when we can rebuild our relationship with God and with others, opening our hearts in the silence of prayer and emerging from the fortress of our self-sufficiency. Lent is the favourable time when we can break the chains of our individualism and isolation, and rediscover, through encounter and listening, our companions along the journey of each day. And to learn once more to love them as brothers and sisters.

How can we do this? To make this journey, to return to the truth about ourselves and to return to God and to others, we are urged to take three great paths: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. These are the traditional ways, and there is no need for novelty. Jesus said it clearly: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. It is not about mere external rites, these must be actions expressing the renewal of our hearts. Almsgiving is not a hasty gesture performed to ease our conscience, to compensate for our interior imbalance; rather, it is a way of touching the sufferings of the poor with our own hands and heart. Prayer is not a ritual, but a truthful and loving dialogue with the Father. Fasting is not a quaint devotion, but a powerful gesture to remind ourselves what truly matters and what is merely ephemeral. Jesus gives "advice that still retains its salutary value for us: external gestures must always be matched by a sincere heart and consistent behaviour. Indeed, what use is it to tear our garments if our hearts remain distant from the Lord, that is, from goodness and justice?" (BENEDICT XVI, *Homily for Ash Wednesday*, 1 March 2006). All too often, our gestures and rites have no impact on our lives; they remain superficial. Perhaps we perform them only to gain the admiration or esteem of others. Let us remember this: in our personal life, as in the life of the Church, outward displays, human judgments and the world's approval count for nothing; the only thing that truly matters is the truth and love that God himself sees.

If we stand humbly before his gaze, then almsgiving, prayer and fasting will not simply remain outward displays, but will express what we truly are: children of God, brothers and sisters of one another. Almsgiving, charity, will be a sign of our compassion toward those in need, and help us to return to others. Prayer will give voice to our profound desire to encounter the Father, and will bring us back to him. Fasting will be the spiritual training ground where we joyfully renounce the superfluous things that weigh us down, grow in interior freedom and return to the truth about ourselves. Encounter with the Father, interior freedom, compassion.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us bow our heads, receive the ashes, and lighten our hearts. Let us set out on the

path of charity. We have been given forty days, a “favourable time” to remind ourselves that the world is bigger than our narrow personal needs, and to rediscover the joy, not of accumulating material goods, but of caring for those who are poor and afflicted. Let us set out, then, on the path of prayer and use these forty days to restore God’s primacy in our lives and to dialogue with him from the heart, and not only in spare moments. Let us set out on the path of fasting and use these forty days to take stock of ourselves, to free ourselves from the dictatorship of full schedules, crowded agendas and superficial needs, and choose the things that truly matter.

Brothers and sisters, let us not neglect the grace of this holy season, but fix our gaze on the cross and set out, responding generously to the powerful promptings of Lent. At the end of the journey, we will encounter with greater joy the Lord of life, we will meet him, who alone can raise us up from our ashes.
