



POPE ON ASH WEDNESDAY: IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO RETURN TO GOD

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(Vatican Radio) Pope Benedict XVI has given the last public homily of his pontificate in a moving Ash Wednesday ceremony, in St Peter's basilica. His message to those gathered for the liturgy and following through global media, was that it is never too late to return to God and that faith is necessarily ecclesial.

The Ash Wednesday ceremony was moved from its traditional location in the basilica of St Sabina on the Aventine hill to accommodate the large numbers of priests, religious and lay people who wanted to participate in Pope Benedict's last public liturgy.

The Pope began by thanking them – and particularly the faithful from the diocese of Rome – for their support and prayers during his ministry. He then went on to reflect on the first reading from the Prophet Joel Chapter 2, where the Lord says "Return to me with all your heart".

Pope Benedict spoke of the importance of witnessing to the faith and Christian life on an individual and community level. This witness, he said, reveals the face of the Church and how this face is, at times, disfigured by the sins of disunity and division in the Body of Christ.

The community dimension is an essential element in faith and Christian life. Christ came "to gather the children of God who are scattered into one" (Jn 11:52). The "we" of the Church is the community in which Jesus brings us together (cf. Jn 12:32), faith is necessarily ecclesial. And it is important to remember and to live this during Lent: each person must be aware that the penitential journey cannot be faced alone, but together with many brothers and sisters in the Church.

The Pope concluded "Living Lent in a more intense and evident ecclesial communion, overcoming individualism and rivalry is a humble and precious sign for those who have distanced themselves from the faith or who are indifferent".

Following communion as the liturgy drew to an end, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of State addressed Pope Benedict on behalf of all those gathered. He described a "veil of sadness" over the hearts of those gathered around the Pope, at his pending resignation.

"In recent years, your teaching has been an open window on the Church and the world, that has made the rays of truth and love of God to shine through, to give light and warmth to our journey, even and especially at times when the clouds gather in the sky".

Cardinal Bertone concluded: "we want to say to you from the depths of our hearts, with great affection, emotion and admiration: thanks for giving us the shining example of simple and humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord--a worker, however, who was able at all time to realize what is more important: to bring God to men and to lead people to God".

***Below a Vatican Radio translation of the Holy Father's Ash Wednesday homily
[original text Italian]***

Venerable Brothers,

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

Today, Ash Wednesday, we begin a new Lenten journey, a journey that extends over forty days and leads us towards the joy of Easter, to victory of Life over death. Following the ancient Roman tradition of Lenten stations, we are gathered for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The tradition says that the first *statio* took place in the Basilica of Saint Sabina on the Aventine Hill. Circumstances suggested we gather in St. Peter's Basilica. Tonight there are many of us gathered around the tomb of the Apostle Peter, to also ask him to pray for the path of the Church going forward at this particular moment in time, to renew our faith in the Supreme Pastor, Christ the Lord. For me it is also a good opportunity to thank everyone, especially the faithful of the Diocese of Rome, as I prepare to conclude the Petrine ministry, and I ask you for a special remembrance in your prayer.

The readings that have just been proclaimed offer us ideas which, by the grace of God, we are called to transform into a concrete attitude and behaviour during Lent. First of all the Church proposes the powerful appeal which the prophet Joel addresses to the people of Israel, "Thus says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning" (2.12). Please note the phrase "with all your heart," which means from the very core of our thoughts and feelings, from the roots of our decisions, choices and actions, with a gesture of total and radical freedom. But is this return to God possible? Yes, because there is a force that does not reside in our hearts, but that emanates from the heart of God and the power of His mercy. The prophet says: "return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting in punishment" (v. 13). It is possible to return to the Lord, it is a 'grace', because it is the work of God and the fruit of faith that we entrust to His mercy. But this return to God becomes a reality in our lives only when the grace of God penetrates and moves our innermost core, gifting us the power that "rends the heart". Once again the prophet proclaims these words from God: "Rend your hearts and not your garments" (v. 13). Today, in fact, many are ready to "rend their garments" over scandals and injustices – which are of course caused by others - but few seem willing to act according to their own "heart", their own conscience and their own intentions, by allowing the Lord transform, renew and convert them.

This "return to me with all your heart," then, is a reminder that not only involves the individual but the entire community. Again we heard in the first reading: "Blow the horn

in Zion! Proclaim a fast, call an assembly! Gather the people, sanctify the congregation; Assemble the elderly; gather the children, even infants nursing at the breast; Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her bridal tent (vv.15-16). The community dimension is an essential element in faith and Christian life. Christ came "to gather the children of God who are scattered into one" (Jn 11:52). The "we" of the Church is the community in which Jesus brings us together (cf. Jn 12:32), faith is necessarily ecclesial. And it is important to remember and to live this during Lent: each person must be aware that the penitential journey cannot be faced alone, but together with many brothers and sisters in the Church.

Finally, the prophet focuses on the prayers of priests, who, with tears in their eyes, turn to God, saying: "Between the porch and the altar let the priests weep, let the ministers of the LORD weep and say: 'Spare your people, Lord! Do not let your heritage become a disgrace, a byword among the nations! Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" (V.17). This prayer leads us to reflect on the importance of witnessing to faith and Christian life, for each of us and our community, so that we can reveal the face of the Church and how this face is, at times, disfigured. I am thinking in particular of the sins against the unity of the Church, of the divisions in the body of the Church. Living Lent in a more intense and evident ecclesial communion, overcoming individualism and rivalry is a humble and precious sign for those who have distanced themselves from the faith or who are indifferent.

"Well, now is the favourable time, this is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2). The words of the Apostle Paul to the Christians of Corinth resonate for us with an urgency that does not permit absences or inertia. The term "now" is repeated and can not be missed, it is offered to us as a unique opportunity. And the Apostle's gaze focuses on sharing with which Christ chose to characterize his life, taking on everything human to the point of taking on all of man's sins. The words of St. Paul are very strong: "God made him sin for our sake." Jesus, the innocent, the Holy One, "He who knew no sin" (2 Cor 5:21), bears the burden of sin sharing the outcome of death, and death of the Cross with humanity. The reconciliation we are offered came at a very high price, that of the Cross raised on Golgotha, on which the Son of God made man was hung. In this, in God's immersion in human suffering and the abyss of evil, is the root of our justification. The "return to God with all your heart" in our Lenten journey passes through the Cross, in following Christ on the road to Calvary, to the total gift of self. It is a journey on which each and every day we learn to leave behind our selfishness and our being closed in on ourselves, to make room for God who opens and transforms our hearts. And as St. Paul reminds us, the proclamation of the Cross resonates within us thanks to the preaching of the Word, of which the Apostle himself is an ambassador. It is a call to us so that this Lenten journey be characterized by a more careful and assiduous listening to the Word of God, the light that illuminates our steps.

In the Gospel passage according to Matthew, to whom belongs to the so-called Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to three fundamental practices required by the Mosaic Law: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. These are also traditional indications on the Lenten journey to respond to the invitation to «return to God with all your heart." But he points out that both the quality and the truth of our relationship with God is what qualifies the authenticity of every religious act. For this reason he denounces religious hypocrisy, a behaviour that seeks applause and approval. The true disciple does not serve himself or the "public", but his Lord, in simplicity and generosity: "And your Father who sees everything in secret will reward you" (Mt 6,4.6.18). Our fitness will always be more effective the less we seek our own glory and the more we are aware that the reward of the righteous is God Himself, to be united to Him, here, on a journey of faith, and at the end of life, in the peace light of coming face to face with Him forever (cf. 1 Cor 13:12).

Dear brothers and sisters, we begin our Lenten journey with trust and joy. May the invitation to conversion, to "return to God with all our heart", resonate strongly in us, accepting His grace that makes us new men and women, with the surprising news that is participating in the very life of Jesus. May none of us, therefore, be deaf to this appeal, also addressed in the austere rite, so simple and yet so beautiful, of the imposition of

ashes, which we will shortly carry out. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and model of every true disciple of the Lord accompany us in this time. Amen!

Below the full text of Cardinal Bertone's address to Pope Benedict:

Most Holy Father,

With feelings of great emotion and profound respect not only the Church, but the whole world, heard the news of your decision to renounce the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, Successor of the Apostle Peter.

We would not be honest, Your Holiness, if we did not say that this evening there's a veil of sadness over our hearts. In recent years, your teaching has been an open window on the Church and the world, that has made the rays of truth and love of God to shine through, to give light and warmth to our journey, even and especially at times when the clouds gather in the sky.

All of us have understood that it is the deep love that Your Holiness has for God and for the Church that has moved you to this act, revealing that purity of mind, that strong, and your strong and demanding faith, the strength of humility and meekness, along with great courage which has marked every step of your life and your ministry, and that can only come from being with God, from standing in the light of the word of God, from continually going up the mountain for to be together with Him before coming back down into the City of men.

Holy Father, a few days ago with the seminarians of your diocese of Rome, you said that as Christians we know that the future is ours, the future belongs to God, and that the tree of the Church grows ever anew. The Church is always renewed, always reborn. To serve the Church in the firm knowledge that it is not ours, but God's, that it does not fall to us to build it, but to Him; to be able to say with complete sincerity: " We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do"(Luke 17:10), trusting completely in the Lord is a great lesson that you, even with this painful decision, give not only to us, the Pastors of the Church, but to the entire People of God.

The Eucharist is a thanksgiving to God. Tonight, we want to give thanks to the Lord for the journey that the whole Church has undertaken under the guidance of Your Holiness and we want to say to you from the depths of our hearts, with great affection, emotion and admiration: thanks for giving us the shining example of simple and humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord--a worker, however, who was able at all time to realize what is more important: to bring God to men and to lead people to God