

## Homily of Ash Wednesday, 2023

### Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51:3-6, 12-14, 17; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the Lenten season, 46 days before Easter. However, Lent is 40 days since six Sundays in the season of Lent are not supposed to be fast days and are not counted. Each Sunday is a feast day, a mini-remembrance of Jesus' resurrection.

The 40 days of Lent represent the 40 years the Israelites spent on their way to the Promised Land, and the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert before his ministry. We are not going to, physically, move into the desert. Rather, we are invited to make a journey of faith; of REPENTANCE, FASTING, ALMSGIVING, and PRAYER. We are invited in the first reading, "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God" (Joel 2:12-13).

What is the meaning of the ashes? The ash cross marked on our foreheads, traditionally from the burnt palms of last year's Palm Sunday, symbolizes contrition and repentance, which is why the day is called Ash Wednesday.

Ash as a sign of contrition and repentance goes back to the Old Testament. "By hearsay I had heard of you, but now my eye has seen you. Therefore, I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). "Jonah began his journey through the city, and when he had gone only a single day's walk announcing, 'Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown,' the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes" (Jonah 3:5-6).

We abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as an honor to the sacrifice Jesus made on the Cross. Abstaining from meat on these days is act of contrition and penance.

**REPENTANCE:** When ashes are distributed, the priests or his assistant says; "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). This reminds us of what we are and how we were created: "Then the Lord God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7).

Or, the priest or his assistant says, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." This reminds us Jesus' first words when he began his ministry: "This is a time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15).

**ALMSGIVING:** Gifts to us from God are not only meant for us. They are meant to be shared with others, especially with the needy. Lenten observance must include works of charity to the needy.

**FASTING:** Fasting is not only from food, it also involves depriving ourselves of basic necessities as a sign of discipline, penance, sacrifice, and self-denial.

About fasting, Pope Francis advises:

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and have trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

**PRAYER:** Why do we have to pray? We are not self-sufficient; we depend on God. We have a need inside of us that cannot be filled by material things. We look to God for our spiritual well-being. In addition to other spiritual duties and exercises, we are encouraged to attend Stations of the Cross, Lenten Retreat, Penitential Service, and Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Again, from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday, we are invited to make a journey of faith; of REPENTANCE, FASTING, ALMSGIVING, and PRAYER. We are invited to a journey of spiritual renewal.

We pray for a Spirit-filled and a fruitful Lenten season. Amen.

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