

**Lenten Meditations
by Pope Francis
(Ash wednesday 2024-2023-2022)**

Lent, journeying from without to within

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 to your room”: this is the invitation that Jesus addresses to each of us at the beginning of the Lenten journey.

Going to your 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-spoliation: 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.

Lent 2024

Lent, the “favourable time” to return to what is essential

“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.

Lent 2023

Lent, a thirst, a desire for a reward

Today, as we embark on the Lenten season, the Lord says to us: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (*Mt 6:1*). It may be surprising, but in today’s Gospel, the word we hear most frequently is *reward* (cf. vv 1.2.5.16). Usually, on Ash Wednesday, we think more of the commitment demanded by the journey of faith, rather than the prize that is its goal. Yet today Jesus keeps returning to that word, *reward*, which can appear to be the reason for our actions. Yet within our hearts, in fact, there is a thirst, a desire for a reward, which attracts and motivates us.

The Lord, however, speaks of two kinds of reward to which our lives can tend: a *reward from the Father* and, on the other hand, a *reward from others*. The first is eternal, the true and ultimate reward, the purpose of our lives. The second is ephemeral, a spotlight we seek whenever the admiration of others and worldly success become the most important thing for us, our greatest gratification. Yet the latter is merely an illusion. It is like a mirage that, once we get there, proves illusory; it leaves us unfulfilled. Restlessness and discontent are always around the corner for those who look to a worldliness that attracts but then disappoints. Those who seek worldly rewards never find peace or contribute to peace. They lose sight of the Father and their brothers and sisters. This is a risk we all face, and so Jesus tells us to “beware”. As if to say: “You have a chance to enjoy an infinite reward, an incomparable reward. Beware, then, and do not let yourself be dazzled by appearances, pursuing cheap rewards that disappoint as soon as you touch them”.

The rite of receiving *ashes* on our heads is meant to protect us from the error of putting the reward received from others ahead of the reward we receive from the Father. This austere sign, which leads us to reflect on the transience of our human condition, is like a medicine that has a bitter taste and yet is effective for curing *the illness of appearances*, a spiritual illness that enslaves us and makes us dependent on the admiration of others. It is a true “slavery” of the eyes and the mind (cf. *Eph 6:6, Col 3:22*). A slavery that makes us live our lives for vainglory, where what counts is not our purity of heart but the admiration of others. Not how God sees us, but how others see us. We cannot live well if we are willing to be content with that reward.

The problem is that this “illness of appearances” threatens even the most sacred of precincts. That is what Jesus’ tells us today: that even prayer, charity and fasting can become self-referential.

In every act, even the most noble, there can hide the worm of *self-complacency*. Then our heart is not completely free, for it seeks, not the love of the Father and of our brothers and sisters, but human approval, people's applause, our own glory. Everything can then become a kind of pretense before God, before oneself and before others. That is why the word of God urges us to look within and to recognize our own hypocrisies. Let us make *a diagnosis of the appearances that we seek*, and let us try to unmask them. It will do us good.

The ashes bespeak the emptiness hiding behind the frenetic quest for worldly rewards. They remind us that worldliness is like the dust that is carried away by a slight gust of wind. Sisters and brothers, we are not in this world to chase the wind; our hearts thirst for eternity. Lent is the time granted us by the Lord to be renewed, to nurture our interior life and to journey towards Easter, towards the things that do not pass away, towards the *reward* we are to receive *from the Father*. Lent is also a journey of healing. Not to be changed overnight, but to live each day with a renewed spirit, a different "style". Prayer, charity and fasting are aids to this. Purified by the Lenten ashes, purified of the hypocrisy of appearances, they become even more powerful and restore us to a living relationship with God, our brothers and sisters, and ourselves.

Prayer, humble prayer, prayer "in secret" (Mt 6:6), in the hiddenness of our rooms, becomes *the* secret to making our lives flourish everywhere else. Prayer is a dialogue, warm in affection and trust, which consoles and expands our hearts. During this Lenten season, let us pray above all by looking at the Crucified Lord. Let us open our hearts to the touching tenderness of God, and in his wounds place our own wounds and those of our world. Let us not be always in a rush, but find the time to stand in silence before him. Let us rediscover the fruitfulness and simplicity of a heartfelt dialogue with the Lord. For God is not interested in appearances. Instead, he loves to be found in secret, "the secrecy of love", far from all ostentation and clamour.

If prayer is real, it necessarily bears fruit in *charity*. And charity sets us free from the worst form of enslavement, which is slavery to self. Lenten charity, purified by these ashes, brings us back to what is essential, to the deep joy to be found in giving. Almsgiving, practised far from the spotlights, fills the heart with peace and hope. It reveals to us the beauty of giving, which then becomes receiving, and thus enables us to discover a precious secret: our hearts rejoice more at giving than at receiving (cf. *Acts* 20:35).

Finally, *fasting*. Fasting is not a diet. Indeed, it sets us free from the self-centred and obsessive quest of physical fitness, in order to help us to keep in shape not only our bodies but our spirit as well. Fasting makes us appreciate things for their true worth. It reminds us in a concrete way that life must not be made dependent upon the fleeting landscape of the present world. Nor should fasting be restricted to food alone. Especially in Lent, we should fast from anything that can create in us any kind of addiction. This is something each of us should reflect on, so as to fast in a way that will have an effect on our actual lives.

Prayer, charity and fasting need to grow "in secret", but that is not true of *their effects*. Prayer, charity and fasting are not medicines meant only for ourselves but for everyone: they can change history. First, because those who experience their effects almost unconsciously pass them on to others; but above all, because prayer, charity and fasting are the principal ways for God to intervene in our lives and in the world. They are weapons of the spirit and, with them, on this *day of prayer and fasting for Ukraine*, we implore from God that peace which men and women are incapable of building by themselves.

O Lord, you see in secret and you reward us beyond our every expectation. Hear the prayers of those who trust in you, especially the lowly, those sorely tried, and those who suffer and flee before the roar of weapons. Restore peace to our hearts; once again, grant your peace to our days. Amen.

Lent 2022