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"Let us daily contemplate his wounds"

Homily of Pope Francis at Mass for Ash Wednesday and distribution of ashes on 17 February 2021.

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We are now embarking on our Lenten journey, which opens with the words of the prophet Joel. They point out the path we are to follow. We hear an invitation that arises from the heart of God, who with

open arms and longing eyes pleads with us: “Return to me with all your heart” (*Joel* 2:12). *Return to me*. Lent is *a journey of return to God*. How many times, in our activity or indifference, have we told him: “Lord, I will come to you later, just wait a little… I can’t come today, but tomorrow I will begin to pray and do something for others”. We do this, time and time again. Right now, however, God is speaking to our hearts. In this life, we will always have things to do and excuses to offer, but right now, brothers and sisters, right now is the time to return to God.

Return to me, he says, *with all your heart*. Lent is a journey that involves our whole life, our entire being. It is a time to reconsider the path we are taking, to find the route that leads us home and to rediscover our profound relationship with God, on whom everything depends. Lent is

not just not about the little sacrifices we make, but about discerning where our hearts are directed. This is the core of Lent: asking where our hearts are directed. Let us ask: Where is my life's navigation system taking me – towards God or towards myself? Do I live to please the Lord, or to be noticed, praised, put at the head of line…? Do I have a "wobbly" heart, which takes a step forwards and then one backwards? Do I love the Lord a bit and the world a bit, or is my heart steadfast in God? Am I content with my hypocrisies, or do I work to free my heart from the duplicity and falsehood that tie it down?

The journey of Lent is *an exodus, an exodus from slavery to freedom*. These forty days correspond to the forty years that God's people trekked through the desert to return to their homeland. How difficult it was to leave Egypt! It was more difficult for

God's people to leave the Egypt of the heart, that Egypt they carried within them, than to leave the land of Egypt. It is hard to leave Egypt behind. During their journey, there was an ever-present temptation to yearn for leeks, to turn back, to cling to memories of the past or to this or that idol. So it is with us: our journey back to God is blocked by our unhealthy attachments, held back by the seductive snares of our sins, by the false security of money and appearances, by the paralysis of our discontents. To embark on this journey, we have to unmask these illusions.

But we can ask ourselves: how do we then proceed on our journey back to God? We can be guided by return journeys described in the word of God.

We can think of the prodigal son and realize that, for us too, it is time to

return to the Father. Like that son, we too have forgotten the familiar scent of our home, we have squandered a precious inheritance on paltry things and have ended up with empty hands and an unhappy heart. We have fallen down, like little children who constantly fall, toddlers who try to walk but keep falling and need, time and time again, to be picked up by their father. It is *the Father's forgiveness* that always set us back on our feet. God's forgiveness – Confession – is the first step on our return journey. In mentioning Confession, I ask confessors to be like fathers, offering not a rod but an embrace.

We then need to *return to Jesus*, like the leper who, once cured, returned to give him thanks. Although ten had been healed, he was the only one saved, because he returned to Jesus (cf. *Lk* 17:12-19). All of us have spiritual infirmities that we cannot

heal on our own. All of us have deep-seated vices that we cannot uproot alone. All of us have paralyzing fears that we cannot overcome alone. We need to imitate that leper, who came back to Jesus and threw himself at his feet. We need *Jesus' healing*, we need to present our wounds to him and say: "Jesus, I am in your presence, with my sin, with my sorrows. You are the physician. You can set me free. Heal my heart".

Once again, the word of God asks us to return to the Father, to return to Jesus. It also calls us to *return to the Holy Spirit*. The ashes on our head remind us that we are dust and to dust we will return. Yet upon this dust of ours, God blew his Spirit of life. So we should no longer live our lives chasing dust, chasing things that are here today and gone tomorrow. Let us return to the Spirit, the Giver of Life; let us return to the Fire that resurrects our ashes, to the

Fire who teaches us to love. We will always be dust, but as a liturgical hymn says, “dust in love”. Let us pray once more to the Holy Spirit and rediscover *the fire of praise*, which consumes the ashes of lamentation and resignation.

Brothers and sisters, our *return journey* to God is possible only because he first *journeyed to us*. Otherwise, it would be impossible. Before we ever came to him, he came down to us. He preceded us; he came down to meet us. For our sake, he lowered himself more than we can ever imagine: he became sin, he became death. So Saint Paul tells us: “For our sake God made him to be sin” (*2 Cor* 5:21). Not to abandon us but to accompany us on our journey, he embraced our sin and our death. He touched our sin; he touched our death. Our journey then is about letting him take us by the hand. The Father who bids us come home is the

same who left home to come looking for us; the Lord who heals us is the same who let himself suffer on the cross; the Spirit who enables us to change our lives is the same who breathes softly yet powerfully on our dust.

This, then, is the Apostle's plea: "Be reconciled to God" (v. 20). *Be reconciled*: the journey is not based on our own strength. No one can be reconciled to God on his or her own. Heartfelt conversion, with the deeds and practices that express it, is possible only if it begins with the primacy of God's work. What enables us to return to him is not our own ability or merit, but his offer of grace. Grace saves us; salvation is pure grace, pure gratuitousness. Jesus says this clearly in the Gospel: what makes us just is not the righteousness we show before others, but our sincere relationship with the Father. The beginning of the

return to God is the recognition of our need for him and his mercy, our need for his grace. This is the right path, the path of humility. Do I feel in need, or do I feel self-sufficient?

Today we bow our heads to receive ashes. At the end of Lent, we will bow even lower to wash the feet of our brothers and sisters. Lent is a humble descent both inwards and towards others. It is about realizing that salvation is not an ascent to glory, but a descent in love. It is about becoming little. Lest we go astray on our journey, let us stand before the cross of Jesus: the silent throne of God. Let us daily contemplate his wounds, the wounds that he brought to heaven and shows daily to the Father in his prayer of intercession. Let us daily contemplate those wounds. In them, we recognize our emptiness, our shortcomings, the wounds of our sin and all the hurt we have

experienced. Yet there too, we see clearly that God points his finger at no one, but rather opens his arms to embrace us. His wounds were inflicted for our sake, and by those wounds we have been healed (cf. *1 Pet* 2:25; *Is* 53:5). By kissing those wounds, we will come to realize that there, in life's most painful wounds, God awaits us with his infinite mercy. Because there, where we are most vulnerable, where we feel the most shame, he came to meet us. And having come to meet us, he now invites us to return to him, to rediscover the joy of being loved.

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