

Meditations: Ash Wednesday

Some reflections that can assist our prayer as we begin the season of Lent.

- Lent, a time of conversion
- Prayer, alms and fasting
- Constantly returning to the Father's house

“YOU ARE MERCIFUL to all, O Lord, and despise nothing that you have made. You overlook people’s sins, to bring them to repentance, and you spare them, for you are the Lord our God.”^[1] These words from the Book of Wisdom, which resonate at the

beginning of today's Mass, are the gateway to the season of Lent.

During the liturgical celebration, we will approach the priest and bow to receive the imposition of ashes. And we will remember Jesus' invitation: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel," and the warning inspired by the book of Genesis: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It is a strong reminder of how fragile our life is. Nevertheless, behind this rite we can discover the tenderness of our God who seeks us out. Saint Josemaría said: "At times the Lenten liturgy, with its emphasis on the consequences of man's abandonment of God, has a suggestion of tragedy, but that is not all. It is God who has the last word – and it is the word of his saving and merciful love and, therefore, the word of our divine filiation."^[2]

At specific moments in our life we become more aware of our own fragility: difficulties in our family or at work, health problems, unexpected events; above all, when we experience the reality of sin in us. All this can make us think that we are merely “dust and ashes.” But our faith gives us the conviction that God’s mercy is greater. In the midst of our limitations, we can always sing with the Psalm: *The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord* (Ps 33:5). So great is God’s patience that, when we turn away from Him, He puts in our heart a longing for his lost love. Lent is a good time to let this longing lead to conversion, to return to the Father’s house to experience his tenderness once again.

EVEN THOUGH we live surrounded by God's mercy, we can sometimes forget this reality. Jesus in the Gospel reminds us that God's merciful look is always upon us. When explaining to us how to give alms, how to pray, how to fast, our Lord insists that it is not worth doing these things just so that others will see us; for then we forget about our Lord and our good deeds become twisted. God, rather, sees "in secret" (cf. *Mt 6,4*). He listens to the intimacy of our heart. The Lenten season is a good time to stop living with our attention turned outward, and instead to foster an interior atmosphere capable of viewing people and things in a new, more supernatural way.

"We mature spiritually by converting to God, and conversion is accomplished through prayer, as well as through fasting and almsgiving, properly understood. It is not just a question of temporary 'practices,' but

of a constant attitude that gives a lasting shape to our conversion to God. Lent, as a liturgical season, lasts only forty days a year. But we must always strive to draw close to God. Hence we need to convert continually. Lent should leave a strong and indelible mark on our lives.”^[3] —

A path of prayer, almsgiving and fasting, suited to our personal circumstances, will help us to raise our sight during these days. “By devoting more time to *prayer*, we enable our hearts to root out our secret lies and forms of self-deception, and then to find the consolation God offers . . . *Almsgiving* sets us free from greed and helps us to regard our neighbor as a brother or sister. What I possess is never mine alone . . . *Fasting* wakes us up. It makes us more attentive to God and our neighbor. It revives our

desire to obey God, who alone is capable of satisfying our hunger.”^[4]

“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.”^[5]

Realizing that God’s mercy fills the earth, that he is a Father who constantly awaits us, does not lead to passivity. On the contrary, love spurs our initiative to find the path leading back to God. And a privileged path is

the sacrament of Reconciliation: “It is the Father’s forgiveness that always sets us back on our feet. God’s forgiveness, Confession, is the first step on our return journey.”^[6] There we find the fatherly face of God, who encourages us and loves us as his children.

“Human life,” Saint Josemaria said, “is in some way a constant returning to our Father’s house. We return through contrition, through the conversion of heart which means a desire to change, a firm decision to improve our life and which, therefore, is expressed in sacrifice and self-giving.”^[7] During this Lent, which is the path back to the Father’s house and to a closer relationship with Him, we sense the presence of our Lady accompanying us. We can place in her hands our desire to be interiorly converted so as to celebrate worthily the Passover of her Son.

^[1] Entrance Antiphon, Ash Wednesday Mass.

^[2] Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 66.

^[3] Saint John Paul II, Audience, 14 March 1979.

^[4] Francis, Message, 6 February 2018.

^[5] Francis, Homily, 17 February 2021.

^[6] Ibid.

^[7] Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 64.
