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Meditations: Thursday after Ash Wednesday

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

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- An opportunity to convert
- Conversion is a gift we should ask God for
- Taking up our daily cross

THE CHURCH, on the first day of Lent after Ash Wednesday, suggests that we meditate on the first psalm in Sacred Scripture. There we find two images that represent two possible paths for our life. Listening to it, it seems as if we are facing a fork in the road. On the one hand, there is the path of those who allow themselves to be made righteous by God, who are *like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither* (Ps 1:3); on the other, there is the path of those who refuse to listen to God, who *are like chaff which the wind drives away* (Ps 1:4). In a certain sense, these are two life-changing choices that depend on how much we open our soul to God: either we remain rooted in God's truth, bearing the fruit of holiness that He wants to send us, or we find ourselves adrift, carried by the wind of small ephemeral joys that push us first to one side and then to the other.

Which of the two paths have we chosen? “We are at the beginning of Lent: a time of penance, purification and conversion. It is not an easy program, but then Christianity is not an easy way of life. It is not enough just to be in the Church, letting the years roll by.”^[1] — God gives us a few weeks to consider carefully our journey in life and to ask for the gift of conversion.

We are called to life, to a life leading to happiness. This is what Moses reminds the Chosen People when they are about to enter the promised land: *I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply (Deut 30:15-16).* Our conversion is not a denial of our

deepest longings; on the contrary, it is a response to the desire for fulfillment that is engraved on the depths of our heart. “The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created. He wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence.”^[2] —

WHAT CAN WE DO to reach the lofty goal of our conversion during this time of Lent? In the opening prayer of today's Mass, the Church suggests that we first ask God for this gift: “Prompt our actions with your inspiration, we pray, O Lord, and further them with your constant help, that all we do may always begin from you and by you be brought to completion.”^[3] — Saint Josemaría wanted the faithful of Opus Dei to recite this prayer each day. We

acknowledge that to embark on this path of transformation we need God's help, to inspire, sustain and accompany us. Our conversion will be, above all, a gift from God that we welcome with humility and gratitude.

In the Old Testament, it was God who took the initiative to call his people out of Egypt and set them on the path towards the promised land. He sustained them during their pilgrimage, and renewed their strength when their spirits wavered. And He does the same now with us: *It is God at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil 2:13)*. How much hope these words of Saint Paul give us! But asking God for this gift does not mean sitting by idly. We can show our openness to his grace in many ways; for example, with specific deeds of penance and, above all, with prayer. "Without daily prayer lived

with fidelity, our acts are empty; they lose their profound meaning, and are reduced to being mere activism which in the end leaves us dissatisfied. There is a beautiful invocation of the Christian tradition that we can pray before any activity: 'Inspire our actions, Lord, and accompany them with your help, so that our every word and action may always begin and end in you.' Every step in our life, every action, of the Church too, must be taken before God, in the light of his word."^[4]

IF ANYONE would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me (Lk 9:23). Jesus addresses these words to the multitude of his disciples, among whom we also find ourselves. To experience the joy of our Lord's resurrection, we must discover and

embrace our daily cross. This is the meaning of the penitential practices of the Lenten season: to die to what is sinful in us, so as to be able to follow Jesus more closely.

Our Lord compared his Passion to the transformation that a grain of wheat undergoes when it is planted in the ground; it seems that the seed is lost, but in reality it is becoming an ear of wheat bearing much fruit (cf. *Jn* 12:24). The Cross does not speak to us of meaningless suffering, but of a transformation: it announces the arrival of a new life. When our Lord invites us to embrace the cross of each day, He is implicitly promising us that each day can be the opportunity for a small transformation, for a new conversion.

Saint Josemaría encouraged us to look optimistically at these small daily struggles. “The summit? For a

dedicated soul, everything becomes a summit to conquer. Every day it discovers new goals, because it does not know how, or want, to limit the Love of God.”^[5] There are as many opportunities for transformation as there are small summits that we encounter every day. On this path that we are beginning, we can turn to the help of our Mother, remembering so many conversions that have been the fruit of Marian devotion.

^[1] Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 57.

^[2] Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 1.

^[3] Roman Missal, Opening Prayer for Thursday after Ash Wednesday.

^[4] Benedict XVI, Audience, 25 April 2012.

^[5] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 17.

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