

Prayer: Gracious God, today begins a period of inner reflection and examination. The days stretch before us and invite us inward to that silent, holy space that holds your Spirit. This special time beckons us to see life through Christ's eyes and the truth and reality of your love incarnate. Give me the grace to enter the space of these days with anticipation of our meeting. And, when I open my soul to your presence, let your loving kindness flow over me and seep into the pockets of my heart. I ask this for the sake of your love. Amen.

Ash Wednesday Homily

The holy season of Lent has begun, by God's grace and mercy. And what a mercy it is to begin this season in this way, together. For now, more than ever, we need each other—each other's faith, each other's presence, each other's compassion. Because Lent is a time of conversion; a time when, with the Spirit's help, we open ourselves to change. We ask the Spirit to turn our lives around so that they are oriented towards God and towards the good of our neighbor. We contemplate the temptations and suffering of Jesus, and humble ourselves with him, as he travels the way of the cross, bearing in his own body the weight of human grief and need. On Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, we are asked to face without flinching the unyielding realities of human experience—that we are creatures made from the stuff of earth, beautiful and good in God's sight; but that we are not God—we are mortals, and we shall one day die; that none of us comes to the end of our lives without having contributed something regrettable, of our own making, to the great abyss of suffering; and that no one comes to the end of life without having been wounded by the sin of another.

We humbly begin the Lenten Season by receiving ashes: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return (cf. Gen 3:19). The dust on our foreheads brings us back to earth; it reminds us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We are weak, frail and mortal. Centuries and millennia pass and we come and go; before the immensity of galaxies and space, we are nothing. We are dust in the universe. Yet we are dust loved by God. It pleased the Lord to gather that dust in his hands and to breathe into it the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). We are thus a dust that is precious, destined for eternal life. We are the dust of the earth, upon which God has poured out his heaven, the dust that contains his dreams. We are God's hope, his treasure and his glory.

Ashes are thus a reminder of the direction of our existence: a passage from dust to life. We are dust, earth, clay, but if we allow ourselves to be shaped by the hands of God, we become something wondrous. More often than not, though, especially at times of difficulty and loneliness, we only see our dust! But the Lord encourages us: in his eyes, our littleness is of infinite value. So, let us take heart: we were born to be loved; we were born to be children of God.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, may we keep this in mind as we begin this Lenten season. For Lent is not a time for useless sermons, but for recognizing that our lowly ashes are loved by God. It is a time of grace, a time for letting God gaze upon us with love and in this way change our lives. We were put in this world to go from ashes to life. So, let us not turn our hopes and God's dream for us into powder and ashes. Let us not grow resigned. You may ask: "How can I trust? The world is falling to pieces, fear is growing, there is so much malice all around us, society is becoming less and less Christian..." Don't you believe that God can transform our dust into glory?

The ashes we receive on our foreheads should affect the thoughts passing through our minds. They remind us that, as God's children, we cannot spend our lives chasing after dust. From there a question can pass into our hearts: "What am I living for?" If I live only to earn money, to have a good time, to gain a bit of prestige or a promotion in my work, I am living for dust. If I am unhappy with life because I think I do not get enough respect or receive what I think is my due, then I am simply staring at dust.

That is not why we have been put in this world. We are worth so much more. We live for so much more, for we are meant to make God's dream a reality and to love. Ashes are sprinkled on our heads so that the fire of love can be kindled in our hearts. We are citizens of heaven, and our love for God and neighbor is our passport to heaven. Our earthly possessions will prove useless, dust that scatters, but the love we share – in our families, at work, in the Church and in the world – will save us, for it will endure forever.

Let us allow ourselves to be loved, so that we can give love in return. Let us allow ourselves to stand up and walk towards Easter. Then we will experience the joy of discovering how God raises us up from our ashes.

Sobered by these things, but not alone, we will make our way through this season with truth and gratitude, until the light of resurrection breaks. Let us begin the journey, then, with Jesus, with each other, and with the whole church everywhere. To God be the glory, amen.

(Adapted from www.romereports.com)