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ASH WEDNESDAY

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, February 22nd, 2023)

Miserere mei, Deus.
Have mercy on me, O God.
(Ps 56:2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

MANKIND'S MORAL DECADENCE, and as a consequence the weakening, and even the disappearance, of the respect due to each human life, scandals endlessly shaking the most respectable institutions, all kinds of diseases and viruses, all of these make a major contribution to a diffuse feeling of deep desperation and disquiet. Is human condition today enviable? Can man be loved? Can he love himself? Would his only outlet be to join those whose sole religion is the protection of nature, and the absolute preservation of animals until their natural death? Indeed, can man still be loved? It is a question worth asking, as the Lenten time of penance is beginning.

This time begins in fact with the significant ceremony of the imposition of ashes on the forehead, along with the formula, "Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return." And is dust lovable?

Ashes, frequently used in almost all the ancient religions, were often associated with dust, as bears witness for instance the

Greek translation of the Bible from the Hebrew called the Septuaginta, because it was carried out by seventy-two elders nearly three centuries before Christ's birth. In Hebrew, the two words 'âphâr, "dust", and 'éphêr, "ash", are phonetically very close. This is very much in line with the genius of the Hebrew language, which willingly expresses a single idea by two semantically close words, and even more so if they are phonetically close.

Ashes are a symbol both of the sin of man, and of his weakness. On the threshold of this time, let us hear Isaiah calling an idolater "he who feeds on ashes."^a Of such a man, the Sage says, "For his heart is ashes, and his hope vain earth."^b How could we not receive these words, we who so easily forget our condition of sinners? O man, if you accept to remember that you are dust, what then are your idols? What are the actions, the ways of thinking, of seeing, the compromises, which in your life displease God, and which you don't, or won't, take the means to get rid of?

What are the prospects for hardened sinners? The Bible affirms without hesitation that the prideful will be made "as ashes upon the earth,"^c and that the wicked will be trodden down as ashes under the sole of the feet of the righteous.^d

Facing the haughty man, stands he who acknowledges his condition and accepts his fault. Such is Ben Sirac: "How can he who is dust and ashes be proud? for even in life his bowels decay."^e

The path of despair, which seems to be the only way out that is left to living men, is however not according to God's plan. Let us remember Abraham's intercession in favour of the sinners of Sodom, and the very protracted negotiation intending to avoid a complete destruction of the city. Shall we make bold to address God? Abraham does: "Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes."^f

Before we begin the training season of Lent, let's remember that the Bible is pervaded with a firm assurance: God's audience is never refused to those who acknowledge themselves as sinners and beseech for forgiveness. Along all the pages of the Bible, human misery appears as an entitlement to beseech for mercy.

a. *Is* 44:20.

b. *Wis* 15:10.

c. *Ez* 28:18.

d. Cf. *Mal* 3:21.

e. *Si* 10:9.

f. *Gn* 18:27.

Our ears are already ringing with the echoes of the Paschal *Exsultet*: “O happy fault, that merited such and so great a Redeemer!” Every man, become through his own fault a son of wrath, remembers that he has been called to be reborn in the waters of baptism. He remembers that the flows of divine mercy are only asking for a chance to irrigate each life.

Could we prevaricate? The Lord’s calling is resounding this morning through the mouth of the Prophet Joel:

Be converted to me with all your heart, in fasting, and in weeping, and mourning. And rend your hearts, and not your garments, and turn to the Lord your God: for He is gracious and merciful, patient and rich in mercy, and ready to repent of the evil. ^a

a. *Jl* 2:12–13.

Such is God’s identity: He is the Tenderness, the Merciful, He who is slow to anger and full of love.

Return to the Lord, but how?

The Prophet Joel shares with us a watchword, “Rend your hearts.” Don’t let us spurn a language which might seem to be too full of imagery. To rend one’s heart is the sole means to bring to light that in it which might be hidden, buried, locked in for far too long. It also means offering to one’s heart God’s rejuvenating light and grace.

Indeed, a man covered with ashes, a man before whom God bends Himself so as to put him back on his feet, is lovable. Instead of ashes, God intends to put on his head nothing less than a crown. ^b

b. Cf. *Is* 61:3.

Through the prayer *super populum*, “over the people”, at the end of Mass, the Church beseeches God for Him to look upon us with this same benevolence. Assuming that each of her children is prompted with a firm will to convert, she asks for them the divine gift of grace, so that they may walk towards a passing, a Passover.

The Gospel invites us to set off with generosity:

But lay up to yourselves treasures in heaven: where neither the rust nor moth doth consume, and where thieves do not break through, nor steal. ^c

c. *Mt* 6:20–21.

Let us therefore walk in the light of the texts of the Lenten Masses, which throughout centuries have prepared catechumens to the grace of baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist, received during the Easter night.

Even though we may have been plunged into the waters of baptism a very long time ago, we still have a path of conversion to tread, strengthened by the reception of sacraments, especially that of penance, by the self-denial proper to these days, and by the practice of works of mercy and prayer.

May Mary, *Mater dolorosa*, “the sorrowful Mother”, keep us at the foot of the Cross. Have mercy upon us, O Lord!

Have a holy, true, and joyful Lent.

Amen.

