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## ASH WEDNESDAY

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU  
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault  
(Fontgombault, February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024)

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters,  
My dearly beloved Sons,

**T**HE COWL DOES NOT MAKE the monk. St. Benedict was well aware of that fact when he wrote in his Rule:

The life of a monk ought always to be a Lenten observance. However, since such virtue is that of few, we advise that during these holy days of Lent he guard his life with all purity and at the same time wash away during these holy days all the shortcomings of other times.<sup>a</sup>

*a. Rule, ch. 49,  
"On the Keeping  
of Lent".*

It may be well worth recalling these lines at the beginning of the holy forty days that are to lead us towards the morning of Easter.

The regularity of life evoked by the Father of monks concerns life in all its dimensions: life of prayer, intellectual life, bodily life. Keeping one's life very pure, washing away all past shortcomings: this requires an effort, a conversion. Such are the marching orders we receive on this Ash Wednesday. As she invites us to practise with a greater zeal almsgiving, fasting, prayer, the Church reminds her children that they have goods,

that they have a body and a soul, and that they should use all of those according to their own weal and the weal of mankind, understood according to the plan of God. She reminds them that life is not so much a leisurely walk, as a Paschal path, a passover towards Heaven, towards an encounter with God, at the hour which He only knows.

Doing penance isn't something that panders to the senses. It can be very tempting to grant oneself small compensations, for instance by giving rise to our neighbour's compassion or admiration, and this is not something new. The Lord upbraids the hypocrites: "For they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast."<sup>a</sup> On the contrary, His disciples must anoint their heads, and wash their faces. Then their fasting won't be known by men, but by the Father Who is present in the utmost secret.

The time of Lent is therefore not a time for breaking Olympic records of asceticism, but a time for a humble walk towards the Father, following Christ's footsteps Who has saved us not by showing off the crushing might of His divinity, but by humbly offering His humanity on the wood of a cross.

St. Paul invites the Philippians to such an imitation of Christ, humble, poor, and patient:

Be of one mind, having the same charity, being of one accord, agreeing in sentiment. Let nothing be done through contention: neither by vain glory. But in humility, let each esteem others better than themselves: each one not considering the things that are his own, but those that are other men's. For let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. For which cause, God also hath exalted Him and hath given Him a Name which is above all names.<sup>b</sup>

Entering Lent means having the firm purpose to refocus one's life on Christ, and yearning to encounter the Father Who dwells in the secret of the heart. Let us flee distractions; let

us give up our ceaseless quest for news, which squanders our spiritual energies; let us make the choice to work at building up our spiritual being, so as to lay up a treasure in heaven.

Laying up a treasure in heaven: such a prospect is not very exciting in a world where everything is weighed and counted. A treasure on earth, even if it risks to be destroyed by moth or rust, even if thieves are on the lookout, remains a very tangible consolation. It often secures friends and commands respect. The rich man has already received his reward. The sole prospect for his fettered heart is to hoard ever more.

A treasure hoarded in heaven is, so to speak, commended to God's discretion, to His secret. Man no longer has any control on this treasure. He only has the hope, founded on God's faithfulness, to discover it someday: "God will reward you." The path then remains open, not towards accumulation of material goods, but towards an encounter, the encounter with the Risen Christ on Easter morning, the face to face of eternity. During this time of Lent, let us learn how to say, "Rabbouni, Master," as Mary Magdalene said with wonder, or "My Lord and my God," with the doubting apostle, Thomas. It is in faith that we must enter into Lent.

This morning's gospel ends with these consoling words, "For where thy treasure is, there will also thy heart be."<sup>a</sup> If our treasure consists in a few material goods, then the dimensions of our hearts amount to these perishable goods. Conversely, if our treasure is in heaven, then our hearts are already in heaven, that is to say, in communion with God today.

*a. Mt 6:21.*

Such is the purpose of Lent: rekindling a communion with the Lord which we might have neglected because our lives were too divided.

To that purpose, we are not the first ones to choose a path of penance and purification. Ever since the Old Testament, the figure of forty has been linked with the path of purification. The forty days of the flood are completed with the covenant between God and Noah, materialised by a rainbow. The forty years exodus in the desert is the gateway to the Sinai theophany. The Lord Himself will experience forty days of retreat before the beginning of His public life, as the gospel of the first Sunday

in Lent will remind us to invite us to tread the same way.

During the time of Lent, the Church doesn't forsake us. She draws more generously from the riches of the Holy Scriptures. The second Sunday in Lent will lead us to Mount Tabor before Christ in His glory. On the third Sunday a dumb man is set free from the bonds paralysing his tongue. On the fourth Sunday, the multiplication of the loaves evokes the abundance of the gifts of grace, and especially the Eucharist. Last, on Passion Sunday, Christ confesses His divinity: "Before Abraham was, I AM."<sup>a</sup> Even if it is difficult for you to attend Mass everyday, why couldn't you during these Lent days meditate the daily readings in your missals?

Drawing from the founts of Scripture and sacraments, giving alms, and retrenching from those goods that pander to the senses, this is living of Christ. A saint who is sad is a sad saint, that is to say a saint who is fruitless, who is barren. True holiness draws its joy from an encounter with Christ, and very naturally, very simply, it shines forth. It evangelises. More than ever, let us enter the school of Mary.

Have a holy, true, and joyful Lent, in the hope of a holy Easter.

Amen.

