



ASH WEDNESDAY

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, February 18th, 2026)

Thou hast mercy on all, O Lord,
and Thou hatest none of the things which Thou hast made:
concealing the sins of men because of repentance
and sparing them,
for Thou art the Lord, our God.
(Introit of the Mass)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

THE MASS OF THIS first day of Lent opens with words of hope that evoke God's unconditional love for every human being He has created. This love encounters humanity's misery and sin. But God is not overcome by the devil's contempt for creation. He conceals the sin of His creature and spares it, in His great goodness, and to the fury of the tempter.

From the earliest days of the Church to the present, the season of Lent has seen the final preparation of catechumens for the sacrament of baptism, which they will receive during the Easter Vigil. The texts used for centuries in the liturgy of this season serve a pedagogical purpose and bear witness to the love of God manifested in Christ's life. So many miracles, so many teachings, and the gift of His own life on the wood of the cross, bear witness to this and invite every person, whether a catechumen or a Christian, to walk the Paschal path in the

footsteps of Christ during this holy season. Renouncing evil in order to rise to life in Christ.

The central place of the Paschal mystery during this Lenten season invites us to reflect on what penance means in the eyes of God.

Our contemporaries are told about the merits of a strict fast to renew physical health, for example, in preparation for athletic feats. Lent is supposedly a time of challenges, exploits, and ultimately, pride.

Alongside the athletic Lent, there is the Lent of the false devout. The Lord portrays them very realistically:

a. Mt 6:16. And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces, that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward in full.^a

For a Lenten athlete or a false devout, there is no Easter journey. There will be a reward. It will come from men.

To these, the prophet Joel addresses a clear message in the name of God:

b. Joel 2:12–13. Be converted to me with all your heart. [...] 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.^b

It is therefore not to men that we must first return, but to God. If the season of Lent is a time conducive to reconciliation, these reconciliations will take on their full meaning, because hatred or anger, while they separate people, distance them above all from God.

The Lord specifies the path of repentance:

c. Mt 6:17–18. But thou, when thou fastest anoint thy head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not to men to fast, but to thy Father who is in secret: and thy Father who seeth in secret, will repay thee.^c

This path has a name: interiority. It is there that each person must amass the treasure that will follow them into eternity. Authentic penance is born in a heart that loves God, and returns there through the fruits it bears.

In this interiority, springs up a dialogue with God, prayer. The liturgy has assigned a verse to the hour of Vespers in Ordinary Time:

Dirigatur, Domine, oratio mea sicut incensum in conspectu tuo.
— Let my prayer rise before Thee like incense before Thy face.^d

d. Ps 140:2.

It is good to say one's prayer. It is better and essential to offer one's prayer. St. Benedict reminds us that it is before the angels that we sing psalms, and that our spirit must be in harmony with our voice. Let us renew our practice of prayer during this Lenten time.

Today, the Church celebrates St. Bernadette. Let us recall Our Lady's requests to the seer of Lourdes.

It was on Thursday, February 18th, 1858, the day after Ash Wednesday that year, during the third apparition, that Mary spoke her first words. After rejecting Bernadette's request to obtain the Lady's name in writing, after asking for the grace of a daily visit for fifteen days, Mary concluded:

I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but in the next.

Glory in the eyes of the world will not be for Bernadette. Mary invites the seer to inner reflection and hope. She needs to amass a treasure for eternity, and for this, to accomplish what truly matters in the eyes of God.

The following Wednesday, during the eighth apparition, the Lady made this request, consistent with the season of Lent:

Penance! Penance! Penance! Pray to God for sinners! Go and kiss the ground in penance for sinners!

Lent is not a time for oneself, but first and foremost a time for God. "God wants all men to be saved."^e The Mother of all men and women has made this divine intention her own and asks her children to follow her on this path. Let us work to ensure this, beginning by improving our relationships with those closest to us.

e. 1 Tim 2:4.

Mary continued: “Go and drink from the spring and wash yourself there...” Let us therefore renew during these holy days our practice of the sacrament of penance. Do we know how to ask for forgiveness? Do we know how to forgive? Do we know how to renounce the worldly goods to which we are too attached?

Let us step forward with joy on the true path of penance. Have a fervent and joyful Lent, in anticipation of the Holy Passover.

Amen.

