

We are called to a life of conversion. This is a real challenge. We know what we ought to do, but we are hard pressed to meet the demands of the Gospel all on our own. As we recognize our limits, we turn more readily to Jesus to help us follow the way.

Jesus challenges us to turn away from sin and turn back to God. In the opening weeks of Lent, we hear biblical stories that speak of beginning anew, of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. We ask forgiveness for our sins and in turn we are called to forgive those who have sinned against us. Hardened hearts must give way to love of enemies. In the latter weeks of Lent, we hear from the Gospel of John about the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Christ is the healer and the life giver. All who believe in him will have eternal life (Ordo).

In normal years, when we receive ashes the priest will either say: **“Repent, and believe in the Gospel”** or ... **“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”** One by one, we are called forward as the sign of the cross is traced on our foreheads and we hear the phrase that accompanies the sign of the cross.

This year however, the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments has asked priests to take special precautions in distributing ashes. I will pray over everyone at one time. Then, I will sprinkle a few ashes on the top of your heads as is the European custom. In the Gospel, Jesus tells us “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them” (Mk 6:1). So, people will not be able to look at your forehead and know that you have been to Mass ... but God will know and that is enough.

When Jesus came out of the desert having fasted for forty days, He came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and his first words were: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. **Repent, and believe in the gospel**” (Mk 1:15). “To enter the Kingdom of God, one has to repent, change their way of living, and believe, that is, put their trust in the gospel” (LaVerdiere 60-63). The Kingdom of God is for men and women from every nation.

In repenting, we are called to experience metanoia, a radical change in our lives. At the end of Lent, we celebrate the paschal mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus suffered and died for our salvation. We must walk with him in his passion, be buried with him in his death, and rise with him to new life as we repent and believe in the gospel.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” As we remember, we journey back to the dawn of creation. “The LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Gn 2:7). God is the master potter molding the human body out of the dust of the earth. In Hebrew the word ‘adam’ translates to “human being” and the Hebrew word ‘adama’ translates to “ground” (Note to Gn 2:7). For the body to come to life, Adam, receives the breadth of God. God breathes into the man’s nostrils and he comes to life.

Let us also recall the resurrection story when Jesus appears to the Apostles in the upper room. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit” (Jn 20:21-22). The Apostles receive the breadth of God so that they may forgive sins ... and thus breathe new life into the faithful who repent, and believe in the gospel.

At life’s end, we are buried and return to the ground. The dust returns to dust. Through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, we know there is more to life. With a fresh breadth from God, the dead rise to new life. “If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Rom 6:8).

So today, even if hidden from the forehead, you receive more than ashes. You are reminded of your call to holiness, to live your life for God. You are reminded of your destiny. God wants to share eternity with you. And you are called to “return to God with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning” (Jl 2:12).