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## On the Lenten Journey

### "A Spiritual Retreat That Lasts 40 Days"

VATICAN CITY, FEB. 6, 2008 (Zenit.org).- Here is a Vatican translation of the address Benedict XVI delivered today, Ash Wednesday, at the general audience in Paul VI Hall.

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*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, Ash Wednesday, we are taking up our Lenten journey, as we do every year, motivated by a more intense spirit of prayer and reflection, penance and fasting. We are entering a "strong" liturgical season which, while we prepare ourselves for the celebration of Easter - the heart and centre of the liturgical year and of our entire existence - invites us, indeed we might say challenges us, to impress a more decisive impetus upon our Christian existence. The reason is that our commitments, anxieties and preoccupations cause us to relapse into habit, exposing us to the risk of forgetting what an extraordinary adventure Jesus has involved us in. We need to begin our demanding journey of evangelical life every day anew, re-entering ourselves by pausing for restorative thought. With the ancient rite of the imposition of Ashes, the Church ushers us into Lent as if into a long spiritual retreat that lasts for 40 days.

So let us enter the Lenten atmosphere which helps us to rediscover the gift of faith received with Baptism and impels us to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation, putting our commitment to conversion under the banner of divine mercy. In the primitive Church at the outset Lent was the privileged time for preparing catechumens to receive the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, which were celebrated at the Easter Vigil. Lent was considered as the period in which to become a Christian which was not brought about in an instant but required a long journey of conversion and renewal. The baptized also joined in this preparation, reviving the memory of the Sacrament they had received with renewed communion with Christ, available to them at the joyful celebration of Easter. Thus, Lent had and still has today preserved the character of a baptismal process in the sense that it helps keep alive the awareness that *being* Christians is always achieved by *becoming* Christians over and over again: it is never a story that is over once and for all but rather a journey which requires us to start out constantly anew.

As he places the Ashes on the person's forehead the celebrant says "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (cf. Gn 3: 19), or he repeats Jesus' exhortation "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (cf. Mk 1: 15). Both formulas are a reminder of the truth about human life: we are limited creatures, sinners always in need of repentance and conversion. How important it is to listen to and accept this reminder in our time! When contemporary man proclaims his total autonomy from God, he enslaves himself and often finds himself in comfortless loneliness. The invitation to conversion, therefore, is an incentive to return to the embrace of God, the tender and merciful Father, to entrust oneself to him, to entrust oneself to him as adoptive sons, regenerated by his love. With wise pedagogy the Church repeats that conversion is first and foremost a grace, a gift that opens the heart to God's infinite goodness. He himself anticipates with his grace our desire for

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conversion and accompanies our efforts for full adherence to his saving will. Therefore, to convert is to let oneself be won over by Jesus (cf. Phil 3: 12) and "to return" with him to the Father.

Conversion thus entails placing oneself humbly at the school of Jesus and walking meekly in his footsteps. In this regard the words with which he himself points out the conditions for being his true disciples are enlightening. After affirming: "Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it", he adds: "For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Mk 8: 35-36). To what extent does a life that is totally spent in achieving success, longing for prestige and seeking commodities to the point of excluding God from one's horizon, truly lead to happiness? Can true happiness exist when God is left out of consideration? Experience shows that we are not happy because our material expectations and needs are satisfied. In fact, the only joy that fills the human heart is that which comes from God: indeed, we stand in need of infinite joy. Neither daily concerns nor life's difficulties succeed in extinguishing the joy that is born from friendship with God. Jesus' invitation to take up one's cross and follow him may at first sight seem harsh and contrary to what we hope for, mortifying our desire for personal fulfilment. At a closer look, however, we discover that it is not like this: the witness of the saints shows that in the Cross of Christ, in the love that is given, in renouncing the possession of oneself, one finds that deep serenity which is the source of generous dedication to our brethren, especially to the poor and the needy, and this also gives us joy. The Lenten journey of conversion on which we are setting out today together with the entire Church thus becomes a favourable opportunity, "the acceptable time" (II Cor 6: 2) for renewing our filial abandonment in the hands of God and for putting into practice what Jesus continues to repeat to us: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk 8: 34) and this is how one ventures forth on the path of love and true happiness.

In the Lenten Season the Church, echoing the Gospel, proposes some specific tasks that accompany the faithful in this process of inner renewal: *prayer, fasting, and almsgiving*. In the *Message for Lent* this year, published just a few days ago, I wished to dwell "on the practice of almsgiving, which represents a specific way to assist those in need and, at the same time, an exercise in self-denial to free us from attachment to worldly goods" (*Message for Lent*, 30 October 2007). We know how the aspect of material riches unfortunately pervades modern society in depth. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called not to idolize earthly goods, but to use them as a means to live and to help others who are in need. By pointing out to us the practice of almsgiving, the Church teaches us to meet our neighbour's needs, in the imitation of Jesus who, as St Paul observed, made himself poor to enrich us with his poverty (cf. II Cor 8: 9). "In his school", I also wrote in the *Message* quoted, "we can learn to make of our lives a total gift; imitating him, we are able to make ourselves available, not so much in giving a part of what we possess, but our very selves". And I continued, "Cannot the entire Gospel be summarized perhaps in the one commandment of love? The Lenten practice of almsgiving thus becomes a means to deepen our Christian vocation. "In freely offering himself, the Christian bears witness that it is love and not material richness that determines the laws of his existence" (cf. *Message for Lent*, n. 5).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us ask Our Lady, Mother of God and of the Church, to accompany us on our way through Lent, so that it may be a journey of true conversion. May we let ourselves be led by her, and inwardly renewed we will arrive at the celebration of the great mystery of Christ's Pasch, the supreme revelation of God's merciful love.

A good Lent to you all!

### **To special groups**

This morning I am especially pleased to greet the delegation of government leaders from Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, and I offer my prayerful good wishes for their efforts to promote reconciliation, justice and peace in the region. My warm greeting and prayerful encouragement also go to the participants in the Graduate School

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of the Bossey Ecumenical Institute. I thank the choir for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England and the United States, I cordially invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*, and invite them all to accept promptly and to put into practice with generous perseverance the invitation to conversion which the Church uniquely addresses to us today.

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### APPEAL FOR CHAD

In these days I am particularly close to the beloved peoples of Chad, overwhelmed by grievous internal fighting which has reaped numerous victims and caused thousands of civilians to flee the Capital. I also commend these brothers and sisters who are suffering to your prayers and solidarity, as I ask that they be spared further violence and be assured the humanitarian assistance they need, while I address a heartfelt appeal to them to put down their weapons and take the path of dialogue and reconciliation.

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