

What is the thrust that you give to this year's Lent, that we begin with ashes, placed on our foreheads?

Lent, of course, is a special *season, an opportunity*, a time of grace, a time of penance and prayer—a time during which all our good efforts will focus our hearts and souls, drawing us closer to God, thus preparing us for the great feast of Easter. It all begins today with the *sign of the cross*, marked with ashes on our foreheads. It is a way of recognizing that I am dust, I shall become- or return to dust. So, I need to prepare, I need to be ready.

This ash is made of the burnt palms that we held in our hands on last Palm Sunday. The ash itself is a tender reminder about life's many levels of absurdity and passing nature, with all its splendors. Lent is first and foremost, an invitation to little more silence in our life. We are surrounded by a lot of noise that hinders us from hearing the word. Where there is silence, there is a surprising hidden mystery that takes us into our inner self, allowing a person to explain himself.

Our readings today: through the Prophet Joel, the Lord calls upon us to *return to Him with all our hearts*, with fasting, and prayer. He uses the term, EVEN NOW- , therefore, though lent is in preparation for, and looking into future, it is currently relevant- as a time to examine our hearts to discover the ways that we have strayed from our heavenly Father. He calls us to have a *true spirit of repentance*.

In the Old Testament, people tore their garments as a sign of repentance – but oftentimes it remained merely an external sign, without any genuine repentance; their hearts would not change, and they would not let go of their worldly ways to embrace holy ways.

For example, Like the people in the OT, you might be nurturing a grudge against someone. Maybe you are struggling with a habitual sin. Maybe you tend to respond to a loved one unkindly or sarcastically. Whatever the case,

your heavenly father is always looking for your return. He will never force you, but he longs to see you come back to Him. Clearly, Jesus very gently invites us to fight *hypocrisy* in practicing our works of piety. He reminds us that our Lenten efforts are to be seen by God; and are not meant to impress our neighbors.

Lent is also specially noted as a time to give up. Anything we give up is but a tiny effort in comparison to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Whatever we give up, if it is a regular reminder of the mystery of the cross, then it is an *experience of humility* and a worthy reflection on why we give up things in the first place.

It is good old Lenten practice to abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent. Especially Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of abstinence from meat as well as fasting.

It's important to remind us of the words of Pope Francis: "*Eat whatever you want for Easter, knowing that the sacrifice is not in the stomach, but in the heart. Some may refrain from eating meat during lent, but always complain and criticize other people's lives; a good beef stew will not make you a bad person, just like a fish fillet will not make you a saint. It's more important to have a deeper relationship with God through better treatment of others. Therefore, In Lent, let us be less arrogant but more humble at heart*".

Let us approach Lent, not with fear, but rather with joy. Let us rejoice in our gracious God, who desires not the destruction of the sinner, but his/her redemption. Let us begin this Holy Season of Lent with a penitential frame of mind, seeking out disruptions in our lives and replacing these things with a constant dependence on God and His grace. Have a Blessed Lent.

*Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude. Fast from anger and be filled with patience. Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope. Fast from worries and have trust in God. Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity. Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy. Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others. Fast from grudges and be reconciled. Fast from words and be silent so you can listen. Amen*