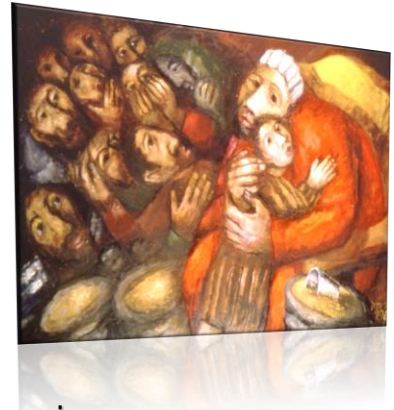


Pope Francis... Lenten Message for 2021

Brothers and sisters,
our *return journey* to God is possible
only because he first *journeyed to us*.
Otherwise, it would be impossible.
Before we ever came to him, he came down to us.
He preceded us; he came down to meet us.
For our sake, he lowered himself more than we can ever imagine:
he became sin, he became death.
So Saint Paul tells us:
“For our sake God made him to be sin.” (2 Cor 5:21)



Not to abandon us but to accompany us on our journey,
he embraced our sin and our death.
He touched our sin; he touched our death.
Our journey then is about letting him take us by the hand.
The Father who bids us come home
is the same who left home to come looking for us;
the Lord who heals us is the same who let himself suffer on the cross;
the Spirit who enables us to change our lives
is the same who breathes softly yet powerfully on our dust.

Lent is a humble descent both inwards and towards others.
It is about realizing that salvation is not an ascent to glory, but a descent in love.
This, then, is the Apostle's plea: “Be reconciled to God.”
Be reconciled:
the journey is not based on our own strength.
No one can be reconciled to God on his or her own.
Heartfelt conversion, with the deeds and practices that express it,
is possible only if it begins with the primacy of God's work.
What enables us to return to him is not our own ability or merit, but his offer of grace.
Grace saves us; salvation is pure grace, pure gratuitousness.
Jesus says this clearly in the Gospel:

What makes us just is not the righteousness we show before others,
but our sincere relationship with the Father.
The beginning of the return to God
is the recognition of our need for him and his mercy, our need for his grace.
This is the right path, the path of humility.

Do I feel in need, or do I feel self-sufficient?

Today we bow our heads to receive ashes.

At the end of Lent, we will bow even lower
to wash the feet of our brothers and sisters.

Lent is a humble descent both inwards and towards others.

It is about realizing that salvation is not an ascent to glory, but a descent in love.

It is about becoming little.

Lest we go astray on our journey, let us stand before the cross of Jesus:
the silent throne of God.

Let us daily contemplate his wounds,
the wounds that he brought to heaven
and shows daily to the Father in his prayer of intercession.

Let us daily contemplate those wounds.

In them, we recognize our emptiness, our shortcomings,
the wounds of our sin and all the hurt we have experienced.

Yet there too, we see clearly that God points his finger at no one,
but rather opens his arms to embrace us.

His wounds were inflicted for our sake,

and by those wounds we have been healed. (cf. *1 Pet 2:25; Is 53:5*)

By kissing those wounds, we will come to realize that there,
in life's most painful wounds, God awaits us with his infinite mercy.

Because there, where we are most vulnerable,
where we feel the most shame, he came to meet us.

And having come to meet us,
he now invites us to return to him,
to rediscover the joy of being loved.

