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Ash Wednesday

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today we are gathered to "work out [our] salvation in fear and trembling" as the Apostle Paul exhorts us (Philippians 2:12). We come before the Lord today - conscious of our sinfulness - and we cry out to him: "Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalm 51:3-4).

Why are we so drawn to Mass today? What is the significance of the blessing and imposition of ashes? "It is certainly not merely ritualistic, but something very deep that touches our hearts."<sup>1</sup> As the ashes are imposed on our foreheads the words of the prophet Joel resonate in our ears: "Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God" (Joel 2:13).

His words remind us that the simple act of receiving the ashes is not enough. An interior conversion - indeed, a detestation of sin - must mirror our external actions. This Jesus makes abundantly clear. The condition of the human heart cannot be easily seen on the outside. This is why the Savior

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for Ash Wednesday, 1 March 2006.

says, "And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you" (Matthew 6:18).

Even so, we are well aware of Jesus' words: "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites" (Matthew 6:16). Yet the mark of the ashes makes it clear to all that we are fasting this day. Why, then, do we do this?

Very often we need physical reminders of our spiritual state. As we feel the ashes placed on our forehead we are reminded of our sinfulness and of our own mortality. There is something rather uncomfortable about the ashes. We feel dirty. We feel self-conscious. We feel shame. The very mark of the ashes calls us to repentance and through them we can say: "For I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is always before me" (Psalm 51:5).

The stark reality of our sin should move us to a deep aversion of sin, even to a hatred of it. The very thought of sin should make us shudder and should direct our eyes to the crucified Christ "who begs love of His creature: He is thirsty for the love of every one of us."<sup>2</sup>

Gazing upon "Him whom they have pierced" (John 19:37) we come to know this fundamental truth:

The response the Lord ardently desires of us is above all that we welcome His love and allow ourselves to be drawn to Him. Accepting His love, however, is not enough. We need

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2007.

to respond to such love and devote ourselves to communicating it to others. Christ "draws me to Himself" in order to unite Himself to me, so that I learn to love the brothers with His own love.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout this penitential season, then, we must constantly return to two key questions: Do I welcome the love of Christ? And, Do I share the love of Christ?

One sure way that we can both welcome the love of Christ and share it is to keep "custody of the senses." We must keep custody of the eyes lest we see something that leads us to sin. We must keep custody of the ears lest we hear something that leads us to sin. We must keep custody of the mouth lest we lead others to sin. The well-known phrase, "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" is quite poignant, even today.

Keeping custody of the tongue is, perhaps, the most difficult to control but at the same time it is the one that does the most harm. When we are tempted to gossip about someone or some situation, we would do well to remember the words of Jesus: "What comes out of a person, that is what defiles" (Mark 7:20).

Let us make a concerted effort this Lent to root out the evil of gossip from our lives. Let us not only refuse to listen to it or to read it, but also and especially let us refuse to speak it.

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2007.

Let us pray not only for ourselves but for each other that sin may be removed from our lives. Let this be our prayer: "A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew with me... Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit to sustain me" (Psalm 51:12, 14). Amen.