



ASH WEDNESDAY

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, March 5th, 2025)

Convertimini ad me.

Be converted to me with all your heart.

(Jl 2:12)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

ON THE THRESHOLD of Lent, we experience many mixed feelings: fear, expectation, joy... As we well know, the normal regime of our sojourn on earth is not the time for an unworried and carefree observance, for a secure and long-term peace, for a perfect communion with God, but rather the demanding time for a fight, the fight to lead a faithful life.

Fighting the good fight means accepting our condition of human beings, through the respect of natural law; it means living our Christian vocation in faithfulness to the divine law, in the long term and with generosity. Such is not the case for most of us. Who has never known a feeling of exhaustion? Who has never been tempted to forsake everything?

Don't let us be mistaken on the place where the fight takes place. We are easily seduced by the more or less mythical idea of a titanic fight against evil. But the true fight isn't there. Isn't the one and only fight, for such unfocused beings as we are, to give God His rightful place, at the heart of our lives?

We can then hear the words of the Prophet Joel, resounding as marching orders:

a. Jl 2:12-13. Be converted to me with all your heart. [...] Turn to the Lord your God: for He is gracious and merciful, patient and rich in mercy, and ready to repent of the evil.^a

Such is the cry of the Good Shepherd, calling His sheep to return to the fold so that He may lead them on a path of hope.

Turning to the Lord. Is it really worthwhile? But we have been warned:

b. Cf. Gn 3:19. *Memento homo quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris.* — Remember, O man, that thou art dust, and into dust thou shalt return.^b

Turning to the Lord to become dust? No indeed, but turning to the Lord to live a true life and prepare our death, our return to dust.

Death is the mandatory path for lives marked by sin. But every man is called to die in the Lord, as a voice coming from Heaven reminds the seer of the Apocalypse:

c. Ap 14:13. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. From henceforth now, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours. For their works follow them.^c

But how may we die in the Lord? How may we return to Him, how may we prepare our death, so that through this death our path of hope may be fulfilled by the encounter with the Lord? The prophet offers us three hints, which tradition has summed up in three words: fasting, almsgiving, and prayer.

“Be converted [...] in fasting, and in weeping, and mourning.” The Lenten time is a time of penance. The colour of the liturgical ornaments is a reminder of that. We shall therefore retrench something from food, drink, too easy—and so often malicious—speech, and unnecessary enjoyment. To go forward to the Lord, let us set our hearts free from the shackles imprisoning them and hindering their freedom.

“Rend your hearts, and not your garments.” Such is the prophet’s second recommendation. The Jubilee in Paray-le-Monial invites us “to render love for love.” A heart that is not rent remains closed to grace. It ignores all forms of compassion. It is deaf to God’s language, meek and humble of heart. These words of Mother Marie Chrysanthe of Jesus, a Franciscan Missionary of Mary, are a strong stimulant:

Nothing can make God as close to us as our neighbour.
For those for whom God is faraway, their neighbour will
never be very close to them.

And she adds a luminous explanation:

If outwardly, our neighbour is the first one to be served, inwardly, it is nonetheless always God, since He has identified Himself with our neighbour. [...] The last Judgment will be about this truth: “I was hungry... I was thirsty...” Therefore, it is we who are still earthbound, and unable to perceive God in our neighbour. And there is no doubt that we are no talking about a poor, humble, good, and suffering neighbour only, but also about a wicked, arrogant, demanding, and aggravating neighbour.¹

Exercising charity is something demanding, all the more as most of the time, the context where this exercise takes place knows little evolution: a family, a community, whose members don’t change, and whose flaws and exactingness are all too well known.

Then the prophet’s third invitation: “Offer sacrifice and libation to the Lord.” Returning to the Lord doesn’t mean making an exhibition of ourselves, provoking admiration. It is commonplace to make a show of our fights and hardships, so as to request help, and make the others feel sorry for us, or even make them flatter us. Few are those who

1. Fr. MARIE-BERNARD, “Vôlontiers”. *Le mot clé d’une étonnante aventure missionnaire — Marie Chrysanthe de Jésus (1896-1963)* [“Willingly”. *The Keyword of an Astonishing Missionary Adventure*] (Vanves: 1996), presentation.

rejoice when they encounter the cross, who allow this cross to embrace them, and bow to embrace it.

d. *Mt* 6:6. But thou when thou shalt pray, enter into thy chamber, and having shut the door, pray to thy Father in secret, and thy Father Who seeth in secret will repay thee.^d

In the film *Libres*, a nun sums up her conversion:

Suddenly, I realised that Christ was alive. That's all... Christ is alive. And at this thought, I felt my heart exploding... Because I told myself, "Christ is alive, and you, where are you?"

Walking the Lenten way faraway from Christ would be of no avail. "Return to Me..." He is our one and only treasure. As pilgrims of hope let us go forward, towards Christ, and with Christ.

e. *Rule*, ch. 49. Far from harping on suffering, St. Benedict reminds us that the spirit of Lent includes a very evangelical note: we have to walk our Lenten path "in the joy of the Holy Spirit," awaiting the holy Passover "in the joy of a spiritual desire."^e Let us therefore fix our eyes towards the holy Passover, towards our own Passover, our passing, our encounter with God.

On the threshold of this holy time, let us therefore enter the school of Mary. Who better than she knows the paths towards her Son's human heart? Have a holy, true, joyful Lent, in the hope of a holy Passover.

Amen.

