

Ash Wednesday 2021
Homily of Bishop John Barres
St. Agnes Cathedral
February 17, 2021

Today, as ashes are sprinkled on our heads, we will hear the words:

”Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

”Remember, you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

As we begin the Season of Lent, we dedicate our spirit of repentance and our prayer, fasting and almsgiving to many spoken and unspoken intentions.

In his January 1, 2021 54th World Day of Peace Message entitled “A Culture of Care as a Path to Peace,” Pope Francis captures beautifully so many of the intentions we bring to this Lenten Season 2021.

Pope Francis writes: “The year 2020 was marked by the massive Covid-19 health crisis, which became a global phenomenon cutting across boundaries, aggravating deeply interrelated crises like those of the climate, food, the economy and migration, and causing great suffering and hardship. I think especially of all those who lost family members or loved ones, and all who lost their jobs. I think too of physicians and nurses, pharmacists, researchers, volunteers, chaplains and the personnel of hospitals and healthcare centers. They have made, and are continuing to make, great sacrifices to be present to the sick, to alleviate their sufferings and to save their lives; indeed, many of them have died in the process. In paying tribute to them, I renew my appeal to political leaders and the private sector to spare no effort to ensure access to Covid-19 vaccines and to the essential technologies needed to care for the sick, the poor and those who are most vulnerable.^[1] Sad to say, alongside all these testimonies of love and solidarity, we have also seen a surge in various forms of nationalism, racism and xenophobia, and wars and conflicts that bring only death and destruction in their wake. These and other events that marked humanity’s path this past year have taught us how important it is to care for one another and for creation in our efforts to build a more fraternal society. That is why I have chosen as

the title of this year's Message, *A Culture of Care as a Path to Peace*. A culture of care as a way to combat the culture of indifference, waste and confrontation so prevalent in our time."

In unity with our Holy Father, we join our Lenten prayer, fasting and almsgiving to this universal aspiration to fraternity and our call to be "ambassadors of Christ."

"Repent and believe in the Gospel."

"Remember, you are dust, and to dust you will return."

In the Lenten desert, we ask the Holy Spirit to lead us to deep repentance for our sins and a new, deep and lasting conversion. As the Book of Joel says: "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with you whole heart..."

In the Lenten desert, we face our mortality. We face our death. We face that we are dust and to dust we will all return.

In the Lenten desert, we face ourselves.

The English Benedictine priest Dom John Chapman (1865-1933) once wrote: "We all have one unpleasant person to live with, whom we can't get away from – ourselves. Put up with yourself, and take your own hated imperfection and weakness as an unpleasantness you have to bear with. It is very hard, but it is really a very perfect act of love to God."¹

Anger, hostility, frustration and self-loathing should be surfaced in this Lenten Season and Christ's humility and meekness must be its balm and the instrument of its healing.

We always remember that the Catholic spirit of repentance and our Catholic theology of the Sacrament of Penance are grounded in humility, mercy, forgiveness and charity rather than in the spirit of self-loathing, self-punishment and self-destruction.

In his April 5, 2020 Palm Sunday homily, Pope Francis explored our own sinful betrayals of the Lord. He writes: "Let us look within. If we are honest with ourselves, we will see our infidelities. How many falsehoods, hypocrisies and

¹ As quoted in David Rooney, *The Wine of Certitude: A Literary Biography of Ronald Knox*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 411.

duplicities! How many good intentions betrayed! How many broken promises! How many resolutions left unfulfilled! The Lord knows our hearts better than we do. He knows how weak and irresolute we are, how many times we fall, how hard it is for us to get up and how difficult it is to heal certain wounds... (Jesus) healed us by taking upon himself our infidelity and by taking from us our betrayals. Instead of being discouraged by the fear of failing, we can now look upon the crucifix (and) feel his embrace.”

The Season of Lent is a time for us all to express our sorrow for the squandered graces and lost opportunities in our lives, the hypocrisies described in Matthew 6, our insincerity and superficiality, our cowardice and lukewarmness, and our pitched resistances to grace and personal conversion.

At the same time, the Season of Lent is a time to renew our confidence and trust in our baptismal call to holiness and mission. Each one of us is called to be and can be, with God’s grace, a saint.

St. Anthony Zaccaria (1502-1539) once lamented his own irresoluteness and lukewarm commitment to the path of holiness. He writes: “My very dear friends, I have to tell you the truth: it is mainly this irresoluteness in my soul, besides, perhaps, some other shortcoming, that has caused in me this great and blamable negligence and sluggishness to the point that either I never start anything at all or at least I linger on it for so long that I never accomplish it.”

Here is a zealous canonized saint lamenting his negligence, his sluggishness, his lack of follow through.

Let’s take heart. Let’s believe again that the Holy Spirit can take us where we need to go.

All of us experience sluggishness and lukewarmness. All of us experience resistances to grace. All of us experience emotional, psychological and spiritual ruts that we find it difficult on our own to emerge from – especially in these Covid-19 times.

But we renew our trust in the Holy Spirit working deeply within us. So often in life we discover that almost without ourselves knowing it, we have emerged from these ruts and the Holy Spirit has been at work helping us to embrace the power and mystery of the Cross.

Archbishop Luis Maria Martinez (1881-1956), the Archbishop of Mexico City, who experienced the turbulent years of persecution of the Church in Mexico, speaks about how the Holy Spirit uses the Cross of Christ to forge, with great artistry, sanctity in our souls: “How wonderful is the work of the artist! By efforts both ardent and gentle he can penetrate hard and shapeless materials with the light of his soul. The instruments he uses, though often crude, can impart to these materials exquisite proportions and shapes. That is the way one may conceive the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, Artist of souls. Is not sanctity the supreme art?”²

This Ash Wednesday 2021 as we begin the Season of Lent, we open our contrite hearts to prayer, fasting and almsgiving and we hear in every dimension of our beings:

“Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

“Remember, you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

² Archbishop Luis Maria Martinez, *The Sanctifier*, (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2003), 9.