

## ASH WEDNESDAY 2010

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

17 February 2010

In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul wrote: “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God”<sup>1</sup> This is what we are all called to do starting today as we begin the spiritual journey we call Lent. We are all sinners—every one of you here, and I am a sinner too. As fallen children of Adam and Eve we all have a tendency to swerve off of the straight path once in a while—some more than others—and Lent is that annual spiritual retreat when the Church calls us back into line with where we should be as redeemed followers of Christ.

All of you, I assume will be practicing some sort of Lenten penances but this should not be the essence of your Lenten observance. St. Matthew records for us that Jesus told his followers to “take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them.”<sup>2</sup> Your Lenten penances are just means to help tame the sinful inclinations of the flesh but if that’s all that you will do, you will not have observed Lent well.

In the first reading today from the Prophet Joel, we heard what the essence of our Lent should be. “Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God.”<sup>3</sup> Fast—yes! But return to the Lord “with your whole heart, with weeping and mourning,” with mourning over all of your sins. Don’t just rend your garments, that is, merely do physical acts of penance. “Rend your hearts ... and return to the Lord your God.” Recalling the words of the Prophet Hosea,<sup>4</sup> Jesus told his followers, “it is mercy that I desire, not sacrifice.”<sup>5</sup> Sacrifices are good but if you make no effort to change your heart, what good are they?

The ancient Hebrew prophets were constantly reminding the Israelites of this. The Prophet Isaiah wrote of what God really wants. “Is this the manner of fasting I wish, of keeping a day of penance: that a man bow his head like a reed ... This, rather, is that fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly ... setting free the oppressed ... sharing your bread with the hungry.”<sup>6</sup>

In his Letter to the Corinthians, Pope St. Clement wrote: “Recall especially what the Lord Jesus said when he taught gentleness and forbearance. ‘Be merciful,’ he said, ‘so that you may have mercy shown to you. Forgive, so that you may be forgiven. As you treat others, so you will be treated. As you give, so you will receive. As you judge, so you will be judged.’”<sup>7</sup> These are our marching orders for Lent. If all that you will do after these six weeks is hand the Lord a bag of chocolate that you gave up, then you will have missed the entire purpose of this season. The Lord wants you to purify your bodies but even more importantly, He wants you to purify your hearts.

Did you come here tonight just to go through this yearly ritual of being marked with ashes or did you really listen to the words that we pronounced over you as we placed those ashes on your foreheads? “Remember man that you are dust and that to dust you shall return.” We sometimes think that we are so important, but all that we are is dust. Rend your hearts and pray with all sincerity the words of Psalm 51: “My offense truly I know them; my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone have I sinned; what is

evil in your sight I have done.”<sup>8</sup> Stop looking at everyone else’s sins. Look, instead, at your own and finally begin to reform your own heart, so that the words of the Prophet Joel will be fulfilled within you this Lent. For the Lord is “gracious and merciful ... slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps he will again relent”<sup>9</sup> and forgive us.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:1.

<sup>3</sup> Joel 2:12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Hosea 6:6.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 9:13.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 58:5, 6, 7.

<sup>7</sup> From a letter to the Corinthians by Pope St. Clement. *Liturgy of the Hours*, volume 2, p 52.

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 51:5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Joel 2:13-14.