

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, J.C.D.
Ash Wednesday Homily at Walter Reed
(17.II.09)



This afternoon the Holy Father will celebrate Ash Wednesday in the Church of Santa Sabina on the Aventine Hill in Rome. His presence there recalls an ancient tradition of the Church, according to which, the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, made his pastoral visitations during the holy season of Lent by visiting different neighborhoods. Each day was the turn of another neighborhood. They would gather to meet the Holy Father and accompany him in procession to the parish church. Some of you might remember in the old missals that the name of the Station Church was written in italics for each day of Lent.

Today the Station Church for the Archdiocese for the Military Services is Walter Reed Hospital. You receive your Archbishop and it was important to me to visit you early in my pastorate, because I want to console the suffering wounded warriors, the aged and the infirm. At the beginning of Lent, those forty days of Church wide retreat, it is important to meet those who have suffered and those who care for them, to comfort the families, and to consider what is really essential in our lives.

We use the ashes from the palms of victory from Palm Sunday of last year to indicate our willingness to change. It is a dramatic sign. We are reminded of the immediacy of the Lord's invitation, the methods which allow us to respond, and the attitude which characterizes our celebration of Lent.

We are reminded forcefully that this is the acceptable time. Paul impresses upon us the immediacy of the Lord's invitation.

The whole Church engages in a time of renewal, a time of grace. It is a time of spirited change and renewal when we try to put in order the confusion of our lives. So often we find excuses to put off an opportunity for spiritual renewal. Our lives are so busy. Other concerns seem more important. The ashes remind us both of the passing of time of this world and the power of divine grace, which is like the fire which transformed the palm into ashes. God's grace is always sufficient. What can be lacking is our willingness to take advantage of it.

Lent calls us to begin authentic relationships – with Almighty God, with those around us and with ourselves. Sometimes the last mentioned is the most difficult because it is easy to avoid the hard questions, to look at others, or to bury our heads in the sand. Perhaps the hospital setting puts us in touch with the reality of human existence; we see or experience pain. We depend on or serve others. We are faced with the stark reality of the end of life's pilgrimage. We see the reality of the cross.

The drama of this human experience calls us to appreciate the present acceptable time to re-establish broken dialogues and to engage in the process of reconciliation.

Paul talks about being an ambassador of Christ. After many years of diplomatic service, I can assure you that an ambassador's principal function is to maintain lines of dialogue and to assure effective and authentic communication. Now is the acceptable time to intensify our dialogue with Almighty God and to improve that which we maintain with our neighbor.

This is the time of Lenten renewal. It is the appropriate hour.

The way to live this time is well known. The Word of God speaks to us about three methods which dominate this period: prayer, alms, and penance. The prophet Joel reminds the Chosen People, who have experienced the calamity of the exile and the profanation of the temple, that the first response is prayer, fasting, and penance. They are the signposts of that permanent conversion process so much a part of our pilgrimage of life.

Paul VI reminded us that our Lenten itinerary must be guided by the Word of God: "Let each one examine his conscience, which has a new voice in our time." Of course, we have to read or listen to this Divine Word and allow it to question our judgments and actions. It is a Word which penetrates and cuts to the heart of the matter. We must allow it to so enlighten us, challenge our conclusions, and open our hearts.

We resolve to dedicate more time to our prayer these days of Lent. We might try to participate more frequently in Mass, the perfect prayer. We might try to spend a bit more time with the Lord.

If we are sick or wounded, we might try to relate our suffering with Christ's expression of love in His Passion and death. Suffering is always hard to appreciate or understand. We want to be healed and be freed of pain. However, we can learn from suffering – we can grow and we can appreciate with how much love Jesus Christ saved us. His acceptance of suffering and death shows us how to endure the worst condition.

Lent is also a special time of charity. We think about giving alms, of contributing to the poor and advancing charitable works. That is an important

dimension of Lent, but we can also practice personal charity: a kind word to someone, a gesture to help a neighbor, an extra service, even beyond our duties, or even that precious gift of time to the lonely, the abandoned, or the overworked.

Our practice of charity is entering into divine discourse, because the Father's Word is always one of love. It is a universal language, but sometimes we fail to make use of its power of communication.

Finally, there is the practice of lenten penance. Obviously, for many who are patients in this hospital, to speak of penance is to preach to the choir. Your lives are already penitential – be it in recovery, treatment, rehabilitation, or physical therapy. I can only invite you to recognize that dimension of your lives and apply it to your Lenten practice – always united to the sufferings of Christ.

For the rest of us, fasting, sacrifice, and self-denial are useful tools. As in the life of Jesus Christ, fasting manifests our freedom and our control over things. Rather than be dominated by the materialism of our time, self-denial helps us to reassert our mastery over things.

These penitential methods also create a desire in us. They increase our longing for the celebration of Easter and remind us of the years of slavery experienced by the Chosen People as they awaited their definitive liberation in the coming of the Messiah. We, too, must long for Someone. We must increase our desire for Christ. Just as the Eucharistic fast, now reduced to only an hour, is supposed to help us long physically for the sacramental union with Christ in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar, so also the lenten fast should help us look ahead to our complete union with Christ in His Kingdom.

We are called to examine our attitude as we begin this annual retreat. How do we intend to approach this special time...what do we expect?

We receive ashes and we recall that authentic liturgical rites must manifest interior dispositions and intentions. The Gospel speaks about attitudes and interior integrity. We can purify our intentions through our intimacy with the Father. Perhaps the desire to be seen and to be praised for our piety is less of a danger now than in an earlier time, but it must still be watched and kept under control.

The Lord asks us to do good because He is good and to live in secret where the Father sees us, loves us and waits for us. He calls His disciples to a justice superior to the expectations of the scribes and the Pharisees—that is to say in our time, the world. Therefore, we are called to be vigilant over our intentions. Lent is a time to examine intentions and purify them.

“Repentance is not the equivalent of self-compassion or remorse, but conversion, a return to centering our lives in the Trinity. It does not mean looking back in disgust, but rather ahead with hope. It is not looking down at our faults,

but looking up to the love of God. It means not looking at what we have not accomplished or not managed to become, but rather what we can become with the grace of God.” (K.Ware, *Dire Dio oggi*, p.182).

We are called to develop an intimate, personal relationship with the Father. Lent is the appropriate time for so doing with an increased intensity and with gratitude as we remember that Jesus, the innocent one, takes on our sinfulness so that we can be converted into a new reality, a new person, not possible by our nature. That is the justice of God.

Today, Walter Reed Hospital with its almost century of service to the infirm is the Station Church for the Archdiocese for the Military Services. Your Archbishop and Pastor has come to begin this holy season of Lent together with you. I am grateful for the opportunity and desire to encourage you at the beginning of this retreat. I hope that this will be the first of many visits, because Christ has so identified Himself with those who suffer and those who care for them.

As the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II wrote:

“Together with Mary, Mother of Christ, who stood beneath the Cross(103),we pause beside all the crosses of contemporary man.

We invoke all the Saints, who down the centuries in a special way shared in the suffering of Christ. We ask them to support us.

And we ask all you who suffer to support us. We ask precisely you who are weak to become a source of strength for the Church and humanity. In the terrible battle between the forces of good and evil, revealed to our eyes by our modern world, may your suffering in union with the Cross of Christ be victorious!” (Salvifici Dolores 31)