

## Ash Wednesday 2024

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Allow me to begin this homily with a word of thanks. Gathering together for the great act of thanksgiving that is the Eucharist, it is my desire to thank all of you who care for the sick and wounded and all of you who support the work of this great medical center. We are reminded that “Our vulnerability forms the basis for an *ethics of care*, especially in the medical field, which is expressed in concern, dedication, shared participation and responsibility towards the women and men entrusted to us for material and spiritual assistance in their hour of need.”<sup>1</sup>

Growing up I watched my father practice medicine, witnessed his care for the patient, and his sleepless nights when someone was gravely ill. Yours is an impressive profession.

Secondly, it is a great joy to know that the Franciscan Friars are once again ministering to all of you at the Medical Center. I rejoice in the gentle spiritual care of these sons of St. Francis who give of themselves to meet the needs of all here. They are truly ambassadors of Christ.

Ash Wednesday begins a time of spiritual retreat for the Church. We unite ourselves to Christ who before He began His public ministry spent forty days in the desert fasting and praying. He gave us an example and in today’s Gospel He indicates how we are to live this time. He calls us to use discretion as we give to the poor so that we respond to the person of Christ who identifies with the one in need and not as something showy.

He calls us to penance and fasting. Each person knows how to follow those counsels in his or her daily life. Perhaps in a hospital many people offer their sufferings and see them as an avenue to relate more deeply with the sufferings of Christ. When we are able to do that we understand how much we are loved. If we look a bit further we also recognize that innate dignity of every person.

Finally, Lent is a time of prayer. That conversation with Almighty God helps us to move forward, to sanctify the day, to praise, thank, express sorrow for our sins, and to ask the Lord for favors or needs. It is an essential element to living Lent. At the very minimum we should begin each day by dedicating it to the Triune God. As Bishop Barron recommends, “pray to draw closer to the Lord as the center of your life—and the reason you do everything.”<sup>2</sup>

In our prayer, Pope Francis calls us to be attentive: “When the Lord calls out to Moses from the burning bush, he immediately shows that he is a God who sees and, above all, hears: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Samaritanus Bonus*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Barron, *Lenten Gospel Reflections*, p.7.

their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them..., and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:7-8). Today too, the cry of so many of our oppressed brothers and sisters rises to heaven. Let us ask ourselves: Do we hear that cry? Does it trouble us? Does it move us?”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed we must include prayers for peace in the Holy Land, in Ukraine, in Africa, and everywhere where people have not learned to live as brothers and sisters. Even in our own land we see the incivility, the violence, and the inability to work together to care for others. Perhaps we should export what happens here at Walter Reed where people work together to care for those in need. That would be a way to serve as an Ambassador of Christ.

Pope Francis calls us to see the unity in the principal activities of this season of retreat. “... prayer, almsgiving and fasting are not three unrelated acts, but a single movement of openness and self-emptying, in which we cast out the idols that weigh us down, the attachments that imprison us. Then the atrophied and isolated heart will revive. Slow down, then, and pause! The contemplative dimension of life that Lent helps us to rediscover will release new energies. In the presence of God, we become brothers and sisters, more sensitive to one another: in place of threats and enemies, we discover companions and fellow travelers.”<sup>4</sup>

Central to this time of Lent are steps in the path of conversion. Prayer, fasting, and charity are all means to further us in the process. When we truly meet Christ, we do not remain the same. We set aside sin and are drawn deeper into a fruitful relationship with Him. That touches every aspect of our lives. Indeed the Greek word for conversion indicates a change in direction, a turning around. It implies that sharing of Christ by the witness of our lives.

We will be signed with ashes shortly, because this life is not forever, but also because we can change. We can draw nearer to the Lord. We are never constrained to be slaves to our sins and weaknesses.

Conversion leads to the fullness of life and the victory that we celebrate on Easter Sunday. We recognize that the Lord overcame sin and death and calls us to walk with Him in the newness of eternal life. Remember the waters of baptism freed us from original sin and allowed us to be reborn into eternal life. The end of our earthly pilgrimage will be the fullness of that life. We continually invite others to walk with us. We are missionary disciples who hear the call of the Lord and share it with others.

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, « Message for Lent », 2024, 3.XII.23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*