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Ambassadors for Christ

Biblical Reflection for Ash Wednesday Year C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, FEB. 16, 2010 (Zenit.org).- Ash Wednesday makes one's faith very visible and public. Not offensively -- but also not easy to miss -- the sign of our faith shows up in the office, at school, on buses and subways, in lines at the grocery store, or at the gas station. This small symbol of the cross of ashes on our foreheads expresses an important truth: Faith doesn't happen only at church, but lives among us, in public, every day.

The Scripture texts for the liturgy of Ash Wednesday do not only remind us of sin and death; they are a loud call to overcome sin, to be converted to Christ and the Gospel and to prepare for the new life of Easter. I would like to offer some reflections on what it means to be reconciled to God, to be an "Ambassador for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20-21), and the meaning of authentic piety and devotion as outlined in Matthew's Gospel text for today's liturgy (6:1-6, 16-18). I will conclude with some thoughts on Benedict XVI's profound 2010 Lenten reflection on God's justice.

Be reconciled to God!

Today -- the liturgy tells us -- is the "acceptable time" for our reconciliation with God. Reconciliation is a gratuitous gift of God. Reconciliation must involve everyone: individuals, families, nations and peoples.

In the passage from 2 Corinthians 5:20-21, Paul encouraged the fractious Corinthian community to recognize that God has "reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (5:18). Paul speaks of "the new creation in Christ" (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17) and goes on to tell us: "God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding individuals' faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that we are reconciled. [...] The appeal we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

When we speak of the world as reconciled to God, we are speaking not only of individuals but also of every community: families, communities, clans, tribes, nations and states. In his providence, God made covenant after covenant with the human family: the covenant with our first parents in the Garden of Eden; the covenant with Noah after the Flood and the covenant with Abraham. In the Book of Joshua we learn about the covenant made with Israel, when Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in the land of Egypt. And God has now made the final and definitive covenant with all of humanity in Jesus Christ, who reconciled individual men and women -- as well as entire nations -- to God by his Passion, Death and Resurrection.

In the sacrament of the Eucharist, we celebrate the mystery of our redemption and full reconciliation with God. It is through his passion, death and resurrection that Jesus has saved the world. Before receiving the body and blood of the Lord, we show that we are at peace with one another. The Eucharist is celebrated by a reconciled community. When the celebration is ended, we are sent out to spread this peace and message of

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reconciliation to others.

Mission of high rank

Because we have been entrusted with this message of reconciliation, we are "ambassadors for Christ" (5:20). The mission that we have been given is one of high rank. It is a mission that ennobles us. Because we have been called to be ambassadors, we have to be true and loyal to the one we represent. An ambassador is known by his or her credentials. Ambassadors must give credible proof that they have been sent. As ambassadors of Christ we too must give proof of our mission. And the greatest proof is our own fidelity to the Christian way of life.

If we are reconciled with God, with ourselves and with others, and if we in turn foster Christ's reconciliation in society, we can make a convincing claim to be ambassadors of the Prince of Peace. Just as God took the initiative in sending his son to reconcile the world, so he expects us to take the initiative to restore harmony to a broken world and an often-divided Church.

Can we apply this Christian vision, this wonderful mission of reconciliation, to our own situations? Can we put it into practice among family, friends and community members and try over and over again when we fail? It is very sad when grudges are carried for long periods of time, when people refuse to speak together, when the joy of attending reunions or celebrations is denied someone, perhaps for a misdemeanor that occurred long ago and whose circumstances are practically forgotten!

Process of self-denial

Matthew's Gospel (6:1-6, 16-18) issues a warning against doing good in order to be seen and gives three examples for right living: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. In each, the conduct of the hypocrites (6:2) is contrasted with the behavior demanded of the disciples. The sayings about reward found here and elsewhere (Matthew 5:12, 46; 10:41-42) show that this is a genuine element of Christian moral exhortation.

Let us look closely at what the Gospel demands of us in this threefold process of self-denial: we must pray: "Go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father in private." We must fast: "No one must see you are fasting but your Father." We must give alms: "Keep your deeds of mercy secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."

There is nothing ambiguous about what is required of us this season. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the pillars of the Lenten journey for Christians. This is the piety, the devotion and the sincerity that the Lord seeks from us this Lent.

God's justice

Benedict XVI's 2010 Lenten message, the Church presents us with the spiritual context of the Lenten Season. This year, the Pope's message takes up the great theme of justice, beginning from St. Paul's affirmation: "The justice of God has been manifested through faith in Jesus Christ" [cf. Romans 3:21-22]. Conversion to Christ gives people the strength to break the bonds of selfishness and work for justice in the world. The Pope's message is above all a challenge to our willingness to entrust ourselves to God and to believe in him.

Benedict XVI reminds us that what we need most cannot be guaranteed to us by law. "In order to live life to the full, something more intimate is necessary that can be granted only as a gift: We could say that man lives by that love which only God can communicate since He created the human person in His image and likeness. Material goods are certainly useful and required -- indeed Jesus Himself was concerned to heal the sick, feed the crowds that followed Him and surely condemns the indifference that even today forces hundreds of

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millions into death through lack of food, water and medicine -- yet 'distributive' justice does not render to the human being the totality of his 'due'. Just as man needs bread, so does man have even more need of God."

The Holy Father says: "Conversion to Christ, believing in the Gospel, ultimately means this: to exit the illusion of self-sufficiency in order to discover and accept one's own need -- the need of others and God, the need of his forgiveness and his friendship."

In these words -- charity, solidarity, fraternity -- lie the key to a true understanding of the responsibility of Christians in the world. Solidarity or charity implies the responsibility to defend and protect the universal dignity of any human being anywhere in the world under any circumstances.

Pieties and devotions

Lent is the opportune time to examine our pieties and devotions, and to ask if our lives are truly animated by Gospel justice and charity that find their fullest expression in the Eucharistic banquet.

During this season we are invited to establish or rebuild our pieties and devotions: more focused prayer, more frequent celebrations of the Sacrament of Reconciliation; praying the ancient devotion of the Via Crucis (Stations of the Cross). We cannot choose a piety or devotion out of fear -- and woe to those who choose such out of fear and claim they do it out of religion!

In celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation we are also showing that we are aware that we belong to the Church. There is a triple dimension to confessing our sins. First a confession of praise: we praise God for all the good things that we see in our life. Second, there is a confession of sin: We acknowledge in all simplicity, and with sorrow, our failings. Third, there is a confession of faith: we put our trust in God who has sent his Son to overcome sin. Our theme song for Lent is not "We Shall Overcome," but rather, "God, in Christ, Will Overcome in Us" -- if we allow Him to do so.

[The readings for Ash Wednesday are Joel 2:12-18; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2; and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18]

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On the Net:

Lent at Salt and Light: http://www.saltandlighttv.org/prog_slprog_snl_presents_lenten_video1.html

1st Lenten Reflection "It Took Forty Days": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HctJaL35nDQ>

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