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ASH WEDNESDAY

"Even now, says the LORD, 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. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness."

Joel 2.12



"Come Back to Me!"

Today, the Lord is crying out to you from the Depths of the Divine Heart, "*Come back to me ...!*"

With your whole heart, with all your being, return to me, and be mine! God in his great love and mercy speaks to us through His Bride the Church in today's liturgy, and He cries out, sings out, "Return to *me!* "

This message, these words, are for each and every human heart, for sinner and righteous alike, and are a call from a loving Father, Who would gather His children in His arms and fill them with joy beyond measure. It is the cry of a Divine Lover, of Jesus Christ Himself, a Lover Who recognizes the unfaithfulness of the beloved, and yet cries out nonetheless, "Come back to me, return to me ...!"

Let this day be the beginning of a spiritual journey through Lent with Christ. Leave aside emphasis on the externals and look within your heart, look honestly within yourself and

recognize your tepid response to the love of God and implore His grace, for He alone can transform you and re-create you anew.

All of us deeply long, so desperately desire, to be loved, to experience ourselves as loved --- and so often ... *so often* ... we seek it in the wrong place, with illusive expectations and insatiable demands. Yet, here God is waiting to lavish His Divine love upon us.

Even now, says God! **Now!** Not tomorrow, next week or at some future date, but *now, in this present moment* God wants, desires, cries out for your love; listen to Him calling, "come back to Me, return to Me."

Jesus is not asking us to rend our garments, He is not asking for external expressions of penance alone, for fasting without attention to His voice, He is asking us to rend our hearts. *Rend* means to *tear open*: we must do violence to ourselves, die to our desires for comfort, ease, euphoria. We are called to open our hearts, to rend them, bare in them His presence, and then, into that wound, God can --- and will --- pour His healing love and mercy.

Why do we hide?

God knows all that we are, totally, utterly, more than we will ever even begin to glimpse ourselves. He knows everything that ever passes through our minds, our souls: why hide in vain and to no good end? He *wants us* to show our love, our trust in Him that we bare open our wounds, our heart and surrender all that is within us to Him.

All too often we are tempted purely to make Lent a time of giving up specific foods, **but God is not interested in your diet, He is interested, passionately in your heart, it's your heart, your love, that He wants.**

God calls us to fast from sin, to weep tears of sorrow for our waywardness, and to mourn the pain our sins have brought to others, and then to return totally to Him. "*Come back to Me!*" It is the cry of a Lover.

Prepare your hearts for this Lenten journey:

Jesus Christ awaits you in the great Sacrament of Penance; He awaits your coming, to welcome you back from that pestilence of sin that has wracked you body and soul. Sacramental Confession is nothing less than the source of life and restoration to true sanity, of hope and numberless blessings ... for so, so, many it is the road back to spiritual and emotional health, to an abiding inner joy.

We cannot long live a divided existence without becoming fragmented ourselves. How often we fail to realize that our sinfulness makes its visitation not only upon our souls, but plunders our very bodies as well, manifesting itself in physical illness. We are not, like the angels, pure spirit, but possessed of mind, body and soul and what afflicts the one inevitably affects the other. The Confessional should be seen as the vestibule to healing, a seat of Mercy, for such it is!

Countless souls have been rescued from despair, hopelessness, suicide, revenge, insanity itself; how many of our human passions and weaknesses have been corrected, amended, through this beautiful Sacrament? It is not, or should not be, an occasion when we allow our fears to subdue us, keeping us in bondage to sin. It is a temptation when we regard the Confessional as anything less than a divine institution divinely ordained. *It is Jesus Christ Himself Who sits there* waiting to forgive us through the pronouncement of that absolution and the blessing of His Priest.

Fear is a cowardly counselor, and we must recognize that the Confessional will *always* be a battlefield where the evil one will crouch in the pew beside us and try by any measure, through any device, to prevent our going --- for *our* going is *his* defeat.

Hearken, then, to God's call: "*Come back to Me, return to Me.*"

The following is an extract from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; here you have the very mind of Christ, the mind of the Church, and also you have the mind and heart of our Immaculate Mother Mary, for she is the very Mother, the life giver of the Church, her total being is perfectly one with her Son, as that of no other, this is also what she would have for you, what she would have you choose. Remember her words from the wedding at Cana: "*Do whatever he tells you.*"

IV. INTERIOR PENANCE

1430: Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before Him, does not aim first at outward works, "sackcloth and ashes," fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance.²³

1431: Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of His grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).²⁴

1432: The human heart is heavy and hardened. God must give man a new heart.²⁵ Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to Him: "Restore us to thyself, O LORD, that we may be restored!"²⁶ God gives us the strength to begin anew. It is in discovering the greatness of God's love that our heart is shaken by the horror and weight of sin and begins to fear offending God by sin and being separated from Him. The human heart is converted by looking upon Him whom our sins have pierced:²⁷ Let us fix our eyes on Christ's blood and understand how precious it is to His Father, for, poured out for our salvation it has brought to the whole world the grace of repentance.

1433: Since Easter, the Holy Spirit has proved "the world wrong about sin,"²⁹ i.e., proved that the world has not believed in Him whom the Father has sent. But this same Spirit who brings sin to light is also the Consoler who gives the human heart grace for repentance and conversion.³⁰

May this be for each and every one of you a time of returning more totally, more completely to Christ Jesus the Lord; may this time of Lent be a time of grace, truth and love.

Let us pray for one another and for all who struggle with sin, both their own and that of others, we need the support of each other within the mystical body of Christ, let us pray for each other, offer sacrifices for each other.

The following of Christ will involve deep suffering ... but also great joy, and a love that exceeds all that you have ever experienced or will *ever* experience this side of Heaven; the depths and the heights of His love are beyond all human comprehension, for His love is greater than all things.

It is this love that He wants to give to you ... return to him with all your heart.

A Poor Clare Colettine Nun



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