

Ash Wednesday

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is a time for recuperating one's own truth and authenticity ...

The Christian holidays

by ENZO BIANCHI

To receive the ashes means to become aware that the fire of God's love consumes our sin

Every year Lent return, a *full time* of forty days to be lived by Christians all together as a time of conversion, of return to God. Christians ought to live always resisting idols that entice, the time is always right for receiving the Lord's mercy and grace, nevertheless the Church – which in its wisdom knows how we human beings are unable to live always on the same plane of high tension as we daily proceed towards the Kingdom – asks that there be a certain time when we detach ourselves from our daily routine, a time that is 'different', a time for concentrating the major portion of the energies that each one of us possesses in striving for conversion. The Church asks moreover that this effort be lived by all Christians at the same time, that is, that it be a common striving in solidarity of all together. There are thus forty days for the return to God, for repudiating idols that entice but at the same time alienate, for a better knowledge of the Lord's infinite mercy.

Conversion, in fact, is not an event that happens once and for all, but is rather a dynamism that must be renewed in different moments of existence, at different ages, especially when the passing of time can induce the Christian to yield to worldliness, to fatigue, to a loss of the sense and the end of his own vocation, all of which lead him to live his faith schizophrenically. Lent is a time for recuperating one's own truth and authenticity even before being a time of penance: it is not a time of 'doing' some particular work of charity or of mortification, but a time for recuperating the truth of one's own being. Jesus declares that hypocrites also fast, that hypocrites also do acts of charity (cf. Mt 6, 1-6. 16-18): this is why it is necessary to unify one's life before God and put in order the end and means of the Christian life without mistaking them.

Lent is supposed to re-propose for today the forty years that Israel spent in the desert by leading the believer to know himself, that is, to know what the believer's Lord already knows: a knowledge that does not consist of psychological introspection, but that finds light and orientation in the Word of God. Just as Christ fought for forty days in the desert and overcame the tempter thanks to the Word of God (cf. Mt 4, 1-11), so the Christian is called to listen, to read, to pray more intensely and more assiduously – in solitude and in the liturgy – the Word of God contained in Scripture. Christ's struggle in the desert, thus, becomes truly exemplary, and the Christian, combating idols, stops doing the evil that he is in the habit of doing and of doing the good that he does not do! In this way emerges the 'Christian difference', that what constitutes the Christian and renders him eloquent in the company of men, what enables him to show the Gospel lived, made flesh and life.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of this propitious time of Lent and is characterized, as its name proclaims, by the imposition of ashes on the head of the Christian. This is a gesture that perhaps is not understood today, but which, if it is explained and received, can become more efficacious than words in transmitting a truth. Ashes are the fruit of fire that burns, it implies the symbol of purification, it is a reference to the condition of our body, which after death decomposes and becomes dust: yes, just as a leafy tree, once it is cut down and burned, becomes ashes, so our body return to earth, but those ashes are destined for the resurrection.

The rich symbolism of ashes was known already in the Old Testament and in Jewish prayer: to sprinkle one's head with ashes is a sign of penitence, of the desire of transformation through trial, the crucible, through purifying fire. Certainly, it is only a *sign*, which intends to signify a genuine spiritual *event* lived in the Christian's daily life: conversion and repentance of a contrite heart. This very quality of *sign*, of gesture, however, if lived with conviction and invoking the Spirit, can impress itself on the body, on the heart, and on the spirit of the Christian, and thus favor the *event* of conversion.

At one time, in the rite of the imposition of ashes the Christian was reminded above all of his condition of human being taken from the earth and returning to the earth, according to the Lord's word spoken to Adam the sinner (cf. Gen 3, 19). Today the rite's significance has been enriched; in fact, the word that accompanies the gesture can also be the invitation made by the Baptist and by Jesus himself at the beginning of their preaching: 'Repent and believe in the Gospel'... To receive the ashes means to become aware that the fire of God's love consumes our sin, to receive the ashes in our hand

means to perceive that the weight of our sins, consumed by God's mercy, is a 'small weight', to look at those ashes means to reconfirm our Easter faith: we will be ashes, but ashes destined for the resurrection. Yes, at our Easter our flesh will arise and God's mercy will consume by fire our sins in death.

In living Ash Wednesday Christians only reaffirm their faith of being reconciled to God in Christ, their hope of rising one day with Christ to eternal life, their vocation to charity that will never have an end. The day of ashes is the announcement of the Easter of each one of us.

Enzo Bianchi