

## LENT, A TIME FOR MORE INTENSE PRAYER AND PENANCE



Yesterday afternoon, Ash Wednesday, Benedict XVI led a penitential procession from the church of Sant'Anselmo on Rome's Aventine Hill to the nearby basilica of Santa Sabina where he presided at a Eucharistic celebration. During the ceremony the ashes were imposed upon him by Cardinal Jozef Tomko, titular of Santa Sabina, after which the Pope himself imposed the ashes upon cardinals, bishops and a number of faithful.

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In his homily the Pope highlighted how "the call to conversion emerges as the dominant theme" in today's liturgy. Having then recalled how the Church is currently celebrating the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of St. Paul, he explained that the Apostle was "aware of having been chosen as an example. This exemplarity status concerns conversion, the transformation of his life brought about thanks to the merciful love of God".



"St. Paul recognised that everything in him was the work of divine grace, yet he did not forget the need to accept freely the gift of new life received at Baptism".

"How can we fulfil our baptismal vocation?" the Holy Father asked. "How can we emerge victorious from the battle between the flesh and the spirit, between good and evil, the battle that characterises our lives? Today's Gospel reading shows us three useful means to this end: prayer, alms and fasting."

"In this context", he added, "we also find useful references in the life and writings of St. Paul". The Apostle exhorts us to "persevere" in prayer, and to "pray without ceasing". On the subject of almsgiving, he speaks of "the great collection in favour of our poor brethren" and underlines how "charity is the apex of a believer's life. ... He does not expressly mention fasting, but he often calls for sobriety as a characteristic of people called to live in vigilant expectation of the Lord".

"May Lent", said Pope Benedict concluding his homily, "marked by more frequent contact with the Word of God, by more intense prayer, and by a severe and penitential lifestyle, be a stimulus to convert and to love our brothers and sisters, especially the poor and needy".

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