

ASH WEDNESDAY

Lent, a joyous occasion to encounter Christ

ECCLESIA

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It is important to retrieve, in its most significant aspects and in the wake of tradition, what the liturgy offers us in the most intense moments of the year. Ash Wednesday is the ancient and beautiful celebration with which the Church begins its Lenten journey. It helps to understand that one does not embark on a path, such as that of Lent, without the awareness of the fatigue, taking into account the disappointment and sadness,

which are the inevitable consequences of a life that does not depend on Christ.

Together with this, however, we must keep in mind, from the start, that it is a journey during which we must become aware that, every day, the truth of Christ is represented to us; we are called, in other words, to rediscover the beneficial strength of His presence on a daily basis and to understand that the path the Church invites us to take is a secure path. Mankind is not afraid of having to journey and, therefore, struggle, but is frightened of facing an incomprehensible path, of which the outcome is not known or, even worse, of whose positivity is doubtful.

Our heart, therefore, cannot and must not be determined solely and primarily by the awareness of our limitations, of the mistakes we are responsible for, of our vulnerability to the mentality of the world. We must not insist only on evil, but fully recover the sense of that Christian joy that has invested our existence as a consequence of the encounter with our Lord Jesus Christ, present and active in the Church. Each of us is truly, and not so to speak, a child of God, so much so that we can call God with the appellation of Father, addressing Him, every day, with the prayer which expresses the most confidence in Him, the prayer of the Our Father.

The period of Lent is therefore to be considered, first of all, the period in which the Church opens her heart, with renewed sweetness and tenderness, to the mystery of Christ's presence; she rediscovers Him alive - I would be tempted to say, repeating a formula dear to Father Luigi Giussani - "within the bones and blood of life". It is the mystery of a presence that never moves away from us, that draws us close to itself, that attracts us to itself. I recall with great emotion the image that Saint Ambrose gave of the Lenten liturgy: in the period of Lent it is as if we are swathed by the presence of Christ, so that He does not leave us, that He does not abandon us, that no void is created between His presence and our life. Christ is, in fact, the presence of God in our life. In Lent, it is as if Christ cuddles us to Himself asking us not to replace His admirable presence with something else.

This makes our life both full of joy and sadness. Joy because the Lord is present and never abandons us. Sadness because we often find ourselves replacing His presence with something that seems to correspond more. This is the sin in the Christian life: to think that there may be something that replaces His presence.

The Lord is an impending and most tender presence. Impending, because He invests all the spaces of life. Tender, because the Lord gives our life its true meaning, its profound meaning.

Thus, starting the Lenten journey once more means placing our steps on the only path that will never disappoint us. The path we are called to walk following Christ is a secure path because the Lord guides our steps on that sure path that, day after day, minute by minute, opens our hearts to the One who, unique, cannot betray or deceive. And this is what makes our life glad.

*** Archbishop emeritus, Ferrara-Comacchio**