

Ash Wednesday 2024
Homily of Bishop John Barres
St. Agnes Cathedral
February 14, 2024

In his 2024 Lenten message, Pope Francis says: “If our celebration of Lent is to be concrete, the first step is to desire to open our eyes to reality...Lent is a season of conversion, a time of freedom...It is time to act, and in Lent, to act also means to pause. To pause in prayer, in order to receive the word of God, to pause like the Samaritan in the presence of a wounded brother or sister.”

We open ourselves to conversion by opening our eyes to see the reality of our patterns of sin.

We connect our Lenten prayer, fasting and almsgiving for all the needs of the world. We open our eyes to the reality of these needs.

We pray for peace and justice in Ukraine, the Middle East, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the region of the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and Sudan, as well as Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and so many other troubled areas of the world.¹

We pray for those persecuted for their faith and we pray for the religious liberty rights of all people.

We pray for immigrants and refugees.

In his January 1, 2024 World Day of Peace Message, Pope Francis addressed *Artificial Intelligence and Peace*. With the Holy Father, we pray this Lent for the ethical development of science and technology, an ethical development that respects the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of human life.

Today, as ashes are placed on our foreheads, we will hear the words:

”Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

¹ See Pope Francis’ December 25, 2023 *Urbi et Orbi* Message.

”Remember, you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

Our celebration of Lent 2024 occurs this year as every Catholic diocese, every Catholic parish, every Catholic Hospital, University, and Institution in the United States is engaged in an evangelizing *Eucharistic Revival*. A nation-wide Eucharistic Congress will occur this July in Indianapolis.

Ash Wednesday is a day when many inactive Catholics come to Church to receive ashes. The Holy Spirit with great mercy, love and understanding is inviting you to respond to an even deeper grace.

If your life has been far from the Catholic Mass and the Eucharist, I invite you on this Ash Wednesday to return to a powerful and life-changing fidelity to the Sunday Mass.

I invite you to experience the power and liberation of Christ’s mercy and forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance and to cross the bridge into the full practice of your Catholic faith through a radical fidelity to the Sunday Mass and an ever-deepening love for our Lord’s presence in the Holy Eucharist.

Perhaps you are not a Catholic and yet have some mysterious attraction to the Catholic Mass and the Eucharist.

You are not alone! Many saints had the same experience and were drawn to enter the Church through their intuitive experience of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist in our parish churches.

Be open to the Eucharistic movement of the Holy Spirit in your life!

Each one of us in this Lent 2024 is being called to be a missionary of the Eucharist and the Mass.

We are called to prayer, fasting and almsgiving so that we can grow in Eucharistic love and be instruments of the Divine Mercy who make many invitations deep in our many networks of friends, family and co-workers to the Catholic Mass.

“Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

“Remember, you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

In the Lenten desert, we ask the Holy Spirit to lead us to deep repentance for our sins and a new, deep and lasting conversion. As the Book of Joel says: “Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart...”

In the Lenten desert, we face our mortality. The ashes placed on our forehead remind us of this mortality.

We face our death. We face that we are dust and to dust we will all return.

In the Lenten desert, we face ourselves, our temptations, our sins, our failures, our falls, our egos and our resistances to grace.

We also experience the purification of silence and prayer.

We always remember that the Catholic spirit of repentance and our Catholic theology of the Sacrament of Penance are grounded in humility, mercy, forgiveness and charity rather than in the spirit of self-loathing, self-punishment and self-destruction.

The Season of Lent is a time for us all to express our sorrow for the squandered graces and lost opportunities in our lives, the hypocrisies described in Matthew 6, our insincerity and superficiality, our cowardice and lukewarmness, and our pitched resistances to grace and personal conversion.

We are sorry for the times when we have not been heralds of Gospel truth, justice and mercy and have failed to be peacemakers in our families and in the world.

At the same time, the Season of Lent is a time to renew our confidence and trust in our baptismal call to holiness and mission. Each one of us is called to be and can be, with God's grace, a saint.

Let's take heart. Let's believe again that the Holy Spirit can take us where we need to go.

All of us experience sluggishness and lukewarmness. All of us experience resistances to grace. All of us experience emotional, psychological and spiritual ruts that we find it difficult on our own to emerge from.

But we renew our trust in the Holy Spirit working deeply within us. So often in life we discover that almost without ourselves knowing it, we have emerged from these ruts and the Holy Spirit has been at work helping us to embrace the healing power and mystery of the Cross.

This Ash Wednesday 2024, as we begin the Season of Lent, we open our contrite hearts to prayer, fasting, almsgiving and conversion.

We hear in every dimension of our beings:

“Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

“Remember, you are dust, and to dust you will return.”