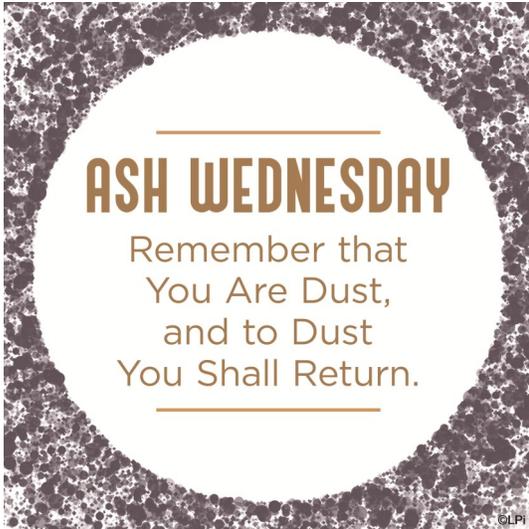


## FROM FR. JASON



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are drawing very near to Ash Wednesday. The Lord is calling us once more to enter the sacred desert of Lent, a time of grace, of stripping away illusions, and of rediscovering the power of the Gospel in our lives. We can live this season not as a mere annual custom or personal devotion, but as a profound kerygmatic journey: a proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus that is necessary to become flesh in each one of us.

Let us return to the Word that the Church places before us on that day. The prophet Joel cries out: "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, and relenting in punishment." These are not poetic words from the past; they are a living

invitation today. God does not desire external shows, torn garments and dramatic gestures, but the tearing open of the heart, the exposure of our wounds, our sins, our fears, our resistances to love.

Then comes the ash: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Or, in the other formula used in many places: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." Both are true. The ash reminds us of our origin in the earth, of our mortality, of how sin has reduced us to dust. Yet precisely in this humility, the cross is traced on our foreheads, not as a mark of defeat, but as the sign of victory! The same dust that we are has been assumed by the Son of God; the same mortality has been conquered in His resurrection. The ash becomes a paschal sign: we die with Christ so that we may rise with Him.

Ash Wednesday can be lived in a special way as the beginning of the great catechetical itinerary of Lent. We gather around the Eucharist, we listen to the Word that scrutinizes us, that reveals our idols, our false securities, our hidden egoisms. The Lord wants to "scrub" us, to purify us like gold in the fire, so that we can walk more authentically. Maybe we have experienced this in the past: fasting not only from food but from gossip, from judging others, from closing our hearts; almsgiving that is not mere charity but sharing our very lives; prayer that becomes dialogue with the Word, allowing it to dwell in us richly.

Perhaps this year the Lord is asking something more radical from some of you. If you have drifted away, come back! The Father is waiting like the father of the prodigal son; he runs to meet you, embraces you, and restores your dignity. Do not be afraid of returning. The ashes are not a condemnation but an announcement: "Now is the acceptable time! Behold, now is the day of salvation!" Today, God wants to make all things new in you.

Let us walk together these forty days toward the Easter Vigil, the mother of all vigils, where the light of the Risen One will shine in the darkness of our tombs. We can accompany one another: through the Word shared, through concrete works of mercy, and through the celebration of the Eucharist. May this Lent be for each of us a true "pasch," a passing over from death to life, from slavery to freedom, from isolation to communion.

Let us not waste this time of grace. Open your hearts to the kerygma anew: Christ died for our sins and rose for our justification. This is the heart of our faith, and Lent exists so that this truth may become alive in us once more.

May the Virgin Mary, who accompanied her Son in His passion and stood at the foot of the cross, help us to rend our hearts and to believe in the Gospel with greater depth.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fr. Jason".