

*The following text of the Holy Father Francis's Message for Lent 2023, was released at a press conference in the Vatican last week.*

## **Lenten Penance and the Synodal Journey**

Dear brothers and sisters!

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all recount the episode of the Transfiguration of Jesus. There we see the Lord's response to the failure of his disciples to understand him. Shortly before, there had been a real clash between the Master and Simon Peter, who, after professing his faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, rejected his prediction of the passion and the cross. Jesus had firmly rebuked him: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a scandal to me, because you do not think according to God, but according to men!" (Mt 16:23). Following this, "six days later, Jesus took with him Peter, James and John his brother and led them away to a high mountain" (Mt 17:1). The Gospel of the Transfiguration is proclaimed every year on the Second Sunday of Lent. During this liturgical season, the Lord takes us with him to a place apart. While our ordinary commitments compel us to remain in our usual places and our often repetitive and sometimes boring routines, during Lent we are invited to ascend "a high mountain" in the company of Jesus and to live a particular experience of spiritual discipline - asceticism - as God's holy people.

Lenten penance is a commitment, sustained by grace, to overcoming our lack of faith and our resistance to following Jesus on the way of the cross. This is precisely what Peter and the other disciples needed to do. To deepen our knowledge of the Master, to fully understand and embrace the mystery of his salvation, accomplished in total self-giving inspired by love, we must allow ourselves to be taken aside by him and to detach ourselves from mediocrity and vanity. We need to set out on the journey, an uphill path that, like a mountain trek, requires effort, sacrifice and concentration. These requisites are also important for the synodal journey to which, as a Church, we are committed to making. We can benefit greatly from reflecting on the relationship between Lenten penance and the synodal experience.

In his "retreat" on Mount Tabor, Jesus takes with him three disciples, chosen to be witnesses of a unique event. He wants that experience of grace to be shared, not solitary, just as our whole life of faith is an experience that is shared. For it is in togetherness that we follow Jesus. Together too, as a pilgrim Church in time, we experience the liturgical year and Lent within it, walking alongside those whom the Lord has placed among us as fellow travellers. Like the ascent of Jesus and the disciples to Mount Tabor, we can say that our Lenten journey is "synodal", since we make it together along the same path, as disciples of the one Master. For we know that Jesus is himself the Way, and therefore, both in the liturgical journey and in the journey of the Synod, the Church does nothing other than enter ever more deeply and fully into the mystery of Christ the Saviour.

And so we come to its culmination. The Gospel relates that Jesus "was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light" (Mt 17:2). This is the "summit", the goal of the journey. At the end of their ascent, as they stand on the mountain heights with Jesus, the three disciples are given the grace of seeing him in his glory, resplendent in supernatural light. That light did not come from without, but radiated from the Lord himself. The divine beauty of this vision was incomparably greater than all the efforts the disciples had made in the ascent of Tabor. During any strenuous mountain trek, we must keep our eyes firmly fixed on the path; yet the panorama that opens up at the end amazes us and rewards us by its grandeur. So too, the synodal process may often seem arduous, and at times we may become discouraged.

Yet what awaits us at the end is undoubtedly something wondrous and amazing, which will help us to understand better God's will and our mission in the service of his kingdom.

The disciples' experience on Mount Tabor was further enriched when, alongside the transfigured Jesus, Moses and Elijah appeared, signifying respectively the Law and the Prophets (cf. Mt 17:3). The newness of Christ is at the same time the fulfilment of the ancient covenant and promises; it is inseparable from God's history with his people and discloses its deeper meaning. In a similar way, the synodal journey is rooted in the Church's tradition and at the same time open to newness. Tradition is a source of inspiration for seeking new paths and for avoiding the opposed temptations of immobility and improvised experimentation.

The Lenten journey of penance and the journey of the Synod alike have as their goal a transfiguration, both personal and ecclesial. A transformation that, in both cases, has its model in the Transfiguration of Jesus and is achieved by the grace of his paschal mystery. So that this transfiguration may become a reality in us this year, I would like to propose two "paths" to follow in order to ascend the mountain together with Jesus and, with him, to attain the goal.

The first path has to do with the command that God the Father addresses to the disciples on Mount Tabor as they contemplate Jesus transfigured. The voice from the cloud says: "Listen to him" (Mt 17:5). The first proposal, then, is very clear: we need to listen to Jesus. Lent is a time of grace to the extent that we listen to him as he speaks to us. And how does he speak to us? First, in the word of God, which the Church offers us in the liturgy. May that word not fall on deaf ears; if we cannot always attend Mass, let us study its daily biblical readings, even with the help of the internet. In addition to the Scriptures, the Lord speaks to us through our brothers and sisters, especially in the faces and the stories of those who are in need. Let me say something else, which is quite important for the synodal process: listening to Christ often takes place in listening to our brothers and sisters in the Church. Such mutual listening in some phases is the primary goal, but it remains always indispensable in the method and style of a synodal Church.

On hearing the Father's voice, the disciples "fell prostrate and were very much afraid. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise, and do not be afraid.' And when the disciples raised their eyes, they saw no one else but Jesus alone" (Mt 17:6-8). Here is the second proposal for this Lent: do not take refuge in a religiosity made up of extraordinary events and dramatic experiences, out of fear of facing reality and its daily struggles, its hardships and contradictions. The light that Jesus shows the disciples is an anticipation of Easter glory, and that must be the goal of our own journey, as we follow "him alone". Lent leads to Easter: the "retreat" is not an end in itself, but a means of preparing us to experience the Lord's passion and cross with faith, hope and love, and thus to arrive at the resurrection. Also on the synodal journey, when God gives us the grace of certain powerful experiences of communion, we should not imagine that we have arrived - for there too, the Lord repeats to us: "Rise, and do not be afraid". Let us go down, then, to the plain, and may the grace we have experienced strengthen us to be "artisans of synodality" in the ordinary life of our communities.

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Holy Spirit inspire and sustain us this Lent in our ascent with Jesus, so that we may experience his divine splendour and thus, confirmed in faith, persevere in our journey together with him, glory of his people and light of the nations.

*Rome, Saint John Lateran, 25 January, Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul*

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