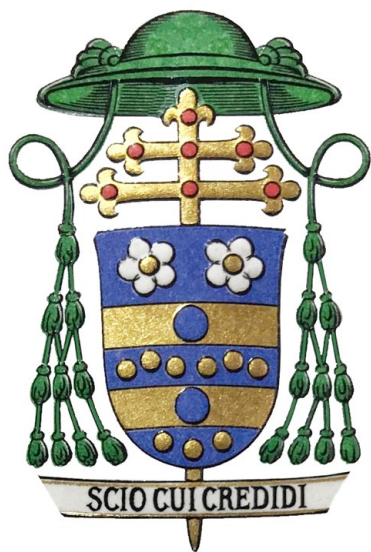


Abp. Viganò on Ash Wednesday: Jonah's Warning of "Forty More Days" Applies to the Church and World Today



IN CINERE ET CILICIO

Homily on Ash Wednesday, in Capite Jejunii

*Omnipotens sempiterne Deus,
here Ninivitis, in cinere et cilicio pœnitentibus,
indulgentiæ tuæ remedia præstitisti:
grants propitius; ut sic eos imitemur habitu,
quatenus veniæ prosequamur obtentu.*

Or. IV in benedictione Cinerum

There is only one thing that moves the Lord to compassion before the multitude of our sins: penance. A penance that is sincere, that exteriorly confirms true repentance for sins committed, the intention not to do them again, the will to repair them, and above all pain for having offended the Divine Majesty by them. *In cinere et cilicio*, with ashes and hairshirt, that is, with that shaggy and pungent cloth that originally hails from Cilicia, woven of goat's hair or horsehair, which was used as a garment by Roman soldiers, and which represents the spiritual and material dress of the penitent.

The divine Liturgy of this day was formerly reserved for public sinners, on whom a period of penance was imposed until Holy Thursday, when the Bishop gave them absolution. *Ecce ejicimini vos hodie a liminibus sanctæ matris Ecclesiæ propter peccata, et scelera vestra,*

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sicut Adam primus homo ejectus est de paradiso propter transgressionem suam. We cast you out of the enclosure of Holy Mother Church because of your sins and crimes, just as the first man Adam was cast out of Paradise because of his transgression. (Pont. Rom., *De expulsione publice Pœnitentium*). This is what the Bishop commanded in the moving rite described in the Roman Pontifical, before exhorting them not to despair of the Lord's mercy, committing themselves with fasting, prayer, pilgrimages, almsgiving and other good works to obtain the fruits of true penance. After this paternal and severe warning, penitents kneeling barefoot in the churchyard watched as the doors of the Cathedral, where the Bishop celebrated the divine Mysteries, were closed. Forty days later, on Holy Thursday, they would return to those doors with the same robes cast off, on their knees, holding an unlit candle in their hands. *State in silentio: audientes audite*, the Archdeacon would have ordered them. And he would continue, addressing the Bishop on behalf of the public penitents, recalling their works of reparation. *Lavant aquæ, lavant lachrimæ*. Then three times the Bishop would sing the antiphon *Venite* and welcome them into the church, where they would throw themselves with emotion at his feet, *prostrati et flentes*. At this point the Archdeacon would have said: *Restore in them, Apostolic Pontiff, what the seductions of the devil have corrupted; by the merits of your prayers and by the grace of reconciliation, bring these men close to God, so that those who were previously ashamed of their sins may now rejoice in pleasing the Lord in the land of the living, after defeating the author of their own ruin* (Pont. Rom., *De reconciliatione Pœnitentium*).

I wanted to reflect on this most ancient rite — which I urge you to read and meditate on for your edification — in order to make you understand how the Church's just severity is never separated from her maternal mercy, following the Lord's example. If she were to deny that there are faults to be expiated, she would be failing in justice; if she were to delude sinners that they could merit forgiveness without sincere repentance, she would offend God's mercy and lack charity. And yet she does not cease to remind us that we are *children of wrath* [Eph. 2:3], because of Adam's sin, our own sins, the sins of our brothers and sisters, and the public sins of nations, which are so abhorrent today. Holy Church reminds us of the penance of Adam and Eve, the redemption begun in that same paradise with the curse of the Serpent and the proclamation of the protoevangelium: *I will put enmity between you and the Woman, between your seed and her seed: she will crush your head, and you will threaten her heel* (Gen 3:15). Holy Church shows us the many occasions on which under the Old Law, our fathers sinned yet again, and once again obtained mercy from God thanks to penance: the example of the inhabitants of Nineveh is also recalled in the prayers and texts of the blessing of the Holy Ashes. She shows us — especially in the liturgy of Lent, Passion Week and Holy Week — the obedience of the Son of God to the Father's will, in order to accomplish the wonderful work of the Redemption accomplished on the wood of the Cross. She proposes to us the example of the penitent saints, she points out to us the need for

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repentance and conversion, she instructs us with the admirable pedagogy of the sacred rites to understand the gravity of sin, the enormity of the offense against the Divine Majesty, and the infinity of the merits of the Sacrifice of Our Lord that is renewed on our altars.

That door that closes slowly and heavily on its hinges in front of the penitents, leaving them far from the altar, is not deaf cruelty, but rather the suffering severity of a mother who does not cease to pray for them, who awaits them confident of seeing them repentant and aware of the supreme Good of which their faults have deprived them. For the same reason, from Passion Week until the Easter Vigil, the crosses and sacred images in the churches are veiled, to remind us of our unworthiness as sinners and the silence of God, a silence that Our Lord also experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross, and which mystics likewise experienced in the spiritual torments of the Dark Night.

Where has all this gone? Why, at the very moment when the world most needed to be called to fidelity to Christ, was the Church's liturgy stripped of its most pedagogically effective symbols? Why was the rite of expulsion of public penitents abolished, and along with it the rite of their reconciliation? And again: why do Pastors no longer speak to us of original sin, of the way of the Cross, of the necessity of penance? Why is divine justice silenced or denied, while God's mercy is distorted and nullified, as if we were entitled to it apart from our contrition? Why do we hear that absolution should not be denied to anyone, when repentance — as the Council of Trent teaches — is an inseparable matter of the Sacrament, together with the confession of one's sins and the satisfaction of penance? Why be silent about the importance of meditating on Death, the inevitability of Judgment, and the reality of Hell for the damned and Heaven for the elect?

Because a Luciferian pride has led to the construction of an idol in place of the true God.

What could be more comforting than knowing that our innumerable infidelities, even the most serious, can be forgiven if only we humbly recognize ourselves as guilty and in need of the mercy of God, Who gave His only-begotten Son to save us and make us blessed for eternity?

It is the *mysterium iniquitatis* [2 Thess. 2:7], dear children. The mystery of iniquity: how it is permitted by God in order to temper us and make us worthy of eternal reward; how it can appear triumphant in its obscene arrogance, while the Good works in silence and without clamor; how it manages to seduce men with false promises, making them forget the horror of sin, the monstrosity of making us responsible for every suffering suffered by the Savior, for every time He was spat on, every beating He received, every scourge of the whip, every wound, every thorn, every drop of His Precious Blood, every tear, and above all for every spiritual pain caused to the Man-God by our ingratitude. Responsible too for every suffering

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of His Most Holy Mother, whose Immaculate Heart was pierced by sharp swords, uniting Her to the Passion of Her Divine Son.

Forty more days, and Nineveh will be destroyed! (Jon 3:2), announces the prophet Jonah. *The Ninevites believed God, proclaimed a fast, and clothed themselves in sackcloth, all of them, from the greatest to the smallest. And when the news had reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, took off his cloak, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on ashes. Then, by decree of the king and his great officers, an order of this kind was made known in Nineveh: "Men and animals, herds and flocks, let them taste nothing; do not go to pasture and do not drink water; let men and animals cover themselves with sackcloth and cry out to God with strength; Let each one be converted from his wickedness and from the violence wrought by his hands. Perhaps God will change his mind, repent, and extinguish his burning wrath, so that we may not perish"* (Jon 3:5-9).

Forty more days: this warning also applies to us, perhaps more than it was true for the Ninevites. It applies to this corrupt and rebellious world, which has taken away the royal crown from Christ to make Satan reign, he who is murderous from the beginning. It applies to nations that were once Catholic, where the horror of abortion, euthanasia, genetic manipulation, and the perversion of morals cries out to Heaven for vengeance. It applies to the Church, infested with false shepherds and mercenaries who have become servants and accomplices of the Prince of this world, and who consider as enemies the faithful entrusted to them. It applies to each of us, who in the face of this universal subversion believe that we can escape the fight by seeking shelter in the comfortable prospect of God's miraculous intervention, or by pretending to be able to live together with His enemies, accepting their blackmail as long as they leave us our small spaces in which to celebrate the Tridentine Mass.

Forty more days: this is the time that separates us from the feared "pontifical" document with which the authority of Peter, instituted to preserve the unity of the Faith in the bond of Charity, will again be used to accuse of schism those who do not want to bend to new, illicit restrictions of what for two thousand years has been the most precious treasure of the Church and the most terrible bulwark against heretics: the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass; and he who tears the seamless garment of Christ by spreading heresies and scandals will seek to banish from the sacred enclosure those who remain faithful to the Lord.

Forty more days: this is the propitious time in which each of us, in the secret of his room, will be able to pray, fast, do penance, give alms, and do good works to atone for our sins, to make reparation for the public sins of nations, and to implore the Divine Majesty not to abandon His inheritance, the Holy Church, to the opprobrium of being dominated by the nations (Jon 2:12).

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With these dispositions, dear children, it will not be necessary to remind you of the law of abstinence and fasting, because you know how to accumulate those spiritual treasures that no earthly power can take away from you, which will be the best preparation for the celebration of Easter that awaits us at the end of our Lenten journey.

In cinere et cilicio: may the ashes be a sign of the vanity of the world, of the illusory nature of its promises, of the inexorability of temporal death; may the pungent hairshirt that the soldiers used for their garments spur us to the good fight, as the concluding prayer of the Blessing of the Ashes exhorts us: *Concede nobis, Domine, præsidia militiæ christianæ sanctis inchoare jejuniis: ut contra spiritales nequitas pugnaturi, continentiæ muniamur auxiliis.* Grant us, Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that, as we take up battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint.

And so may it be.

+ Carlo Maria Viganò, *Archbishop*

22 February 2023
Feria IV Cinerum