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**Homily for Ash Wednesday  
Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help**

March 5, 2014

Today we begin this season of Grace, and are offered an invitation to enter into a very powerful period in the Church year. How will we do it? What will be your way of entering into this season of grace?

The Prophet Joel gives us a start: *“Even now, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning: **REND** your hearts, not your garments...for gracious and merciful is he.”* [Joel 2:12-13]

The invitation has been extended, “return to me and rend your hearts.” In other words, tear open our hearts.

Jesus presents to us the activity of the Lenten season in the Gospel, but it is far beyond the externals of the hypocrites. Our Lenten activity must be rooted in an attitude of the heart, the interior place of our souls, the inner sanctuary of our relationship with Christ. “**Rend** your heart” This is where true conversion takes place; this is the place where Christ’s heart and our hearts come together in a quite intentional way for us.

Like those coming into the Church at Easter, we too, are called to be converts, to be looking at our lives and our sinfulness in the light of grace, the light of God’s grace.

In response to this season, many people will to take on different Lenten practices. When we consider our sinfulness in the light of grace, this means that whatever we decide to do, we must do it joyfully in order to thank God and to open ourselves more to God’s overflowing life that surrounds us each moment. Our efforts to change our hearts and to grow in holiness are not because of God’s saving love for us. Rather, they are a consequence of it.

Our Lenten practices will only lead to conversion and life in abundance if they are connected to the “inner sanctuary of our relationship with Christ.” If not, then our fasting from food and drink will be a mere diet; if not, then our almsgiving will be merely giving money away.

In this season we are called to fast and abstain. In this culture of excess, it seems easy to give some things up for a few weeks. I can stop eating chocolate or sweets of any kind. I could give up drinking alcohol or any other type of beverage.

But Lent should be more than a just a time for fasting. It should also be a joyous season of feasting. Lent is a time to fast from certain things and to feast on others. It is a season in which we should:

Fast from judging others; feast on the Christ within them.  
Fast from emphasis on differences; feast on the unity of life.  
Fast from thoughts of illness; feast on the healing power of God.  
Fast from words that pollute; feast on phrases that purify.  
Fast from discontent; feast on gratitude.  
Fast from anger; feast on patience.  
Fast from pessimism; feast on optimism.  
Fast from complaining; feast on appreciation.  
Fast from negatives; feast on affirmatives.  
Fast from unrelenting pressures; feast on unceasing prayer.  
Fast from hostility; feast on non-resistance.  
Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness.  
Fast from self-concern; feast on compassion for others.  
Fast from personal anxiety; feast on eternal truth.  
Fast from discouragement; feast on hope.  
Fast from lethargy; feast on enthusiasm.  
Fast from suspicion; feast on truth.  
Fast from thoughts that weaken; feast on promises that inspire.  
Fast from shadows of sorrow; feast on the sunlight of sincerity.  
Fast from idle gossip; feast on purposeful silence.  
Fast from problems overwhelm; feast on prayer that undergirds.  
Fast from instant gratifications; feast on self-denial.  
Fast from worry; feast on divine order. Trust in God.

**And finally, fast from sin; feast on the abundance of God's mercy.**

The joy in doing this type of fasting and feasting is that they truly lead to rending our hearts and to conversion. And conversion is turning from those things that do not give life, and a turning to God, who gives life to us in abundance.

As you receive the ashes today, may they be a sign of your commitment to reflect upon your baptism, may they be a sign of your commitment to acts of penance and charity which you will undertake, and may they be a sign of your joyful conversion from death to life in abundance.