

**Presentation of
Pope Francis's
Message for Lent 2023**

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We rarely connect Lent and beauty, but this is what Pope Francis invites us to do in the message that we present today. He draws attention to the mountain on which Jesus offers three of his disciples a very bright moment, which will have to sustain their journey.

Here, there are two challenges to common sense.

First: that beauty comes from change, or rather from the effort to think again. In biblical language: from conversion.

Second: that beauty is a collective experience, intimate yes, but not private. In ecclesial language, it is a synodal experience. So, when we work on ourselves in Lent -- an asceticism -- we yearn for the light to increase, the joy to increase. We hope for light in change and collective joy.

It is customary for the Pope's Lenten message to contain a charitable element: that is, it directs the prayer and fasting of believers in the direction of an improvement of the world. Saint Paul VI said: in the direction of integral human development. The Gospel image of the Transfiguration helps us this year to interpret this orientation in a more radical way.

We are distressed by dramatic events. The pandemic situation is still uncertain. The war in Ukraine does not seem to end and is only one among dozens of others, the one that reveals that the whole world is exposed to destruction. In addition, terribly destructive earthquakes remind us of all the natural catastrophes of a creation that seems to cry out, because it groans and suffers (cfr. Rm 8). A primitive idea of divinity would suggest sacrifices and penances to appease the forces that harm us. This is not the Lent of Christians, who rather confess Christ as the light of the world and are oriented to him.

At the end of the last century, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini chose the passage of the Transfiguration to respond to Dostoevsky's question: "What beauty will save the world?" And he observed: "In the disciples who climb the mountain, carrying in their hearts all the anxieties and burdens that agitate their personal and collective history, it is possible to read the questions that are in us about the meaning of time, the demand for meaning that comes from the anguish produced by violence and all tragedies."

In this year's message, Francis brings this observation even closer by employing what Saint Ignatius called the "composition of place", that is, the exercise of the imagination that makes us identify with the situation being described. The Pope writes: "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." Thus, we feel the surprise of the Transfiguration: "The divine beauty of this vision was incomparably superior to any effort that the disciples might have made in climbing Tabor."

Assuredly, this leads us to think of the labours of all who suffer and live their lives as an excessively harsh ascent. And we might ask ourselves if it is not our indifference that makes their journey harder. The Church wants to help remove obstacles and the burdens that hinder human development, life in abundance.

Another theme this year, which Pope Francis refers to explicitly, is the effort to be a synodal Church. Or rather the effort to become one: it is like a long climb. The Pope writes: "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."

We must therefore grasp that the change of mentality -- conversion -- and the communal nature of human life are blessed labours, on which depends "something wonderful and surprising" for this broken world. If we want a Lent of charity, if we believe that prayer and fasting have real effects on the world, we must broaden the idea of almsgiving to something larger, namely the biblical idea of restitution. Just as the synodal journey renews God's word among all the baptized and within the local Churches, so too must the lived Gospel restore joy and hope to all humanity. Joy and hope, *Gaudium et spes*: it is the movement of the Second Vatican Council, an uphill journey that Francis urges us not to abandon. The path is the mission. And the mission is charity, which calls into question an organization of the world and of the Church that may seem unchangeable, but is changeable, because it is the outcome of decisions, of freedom.

Conversion, joy, hope. The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, starting today, will relaunch the contents of this message week after week. We wish to offer the Churches of the whole world our diverse and very practical assistance to embrace the Lenten proposal of Pope Francis and live their own Transfiguration.

Thank you!