

Pontifical Academy for Life  
*28th General Assembly of Members*

**HOMILY FOR ASH WEDNESDAY MASS**  
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Today's Gospel passage has us focus at the end on three verbs – enter, close, and pray – describing in this way the movement Jesus proposes to the prayerful person:

*"enter your room"*

*"close the door"*

*"and pray to your Father, who is in secret."*

To what extent can these verbs concretely help each of us to shape the personal architecture of this time of grace that Lent represents? In what ways do they guide us to achieve a choreography of inner transformation in view of an effective celebration of the Paschal Mystery?

***"Enter your room."***

The first of the verbs is "enter," for in this "re-encounter", in this rediscovery of the Father that the Lenten itinerary exhorts us to make, a necessary condition is to move from the exterior to the interior, from the outside to what solely within can be experienced, from the foreign and distant to the intimate. In the parable of the merciful Father, for example, as the prodigal son goes back into the house, the eldest son, hearing "the music and the dancing," "was indignant, and would not go in" (Luke 15:28). There are many reasons, especially false reasons, that we can cite for staying outside and not entering. Entering requires replacing, in us, our reasons with God's. It

presupposes allowing ourselves to be persuaded by Him; Exchanging our maps, agendas and priorities for the guidance of our life assumed by the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16a). And we know that this is not automatic. Lent may have come and simply met us in our armored, ordinary, individualistic, dissipated daily life. As St. Augustine recalls in his Confessions, we can consume our whole lives in this misunderstanding: "You were inside me and I was outside. There I was looking for you.... You were with me, and I was not with you." It may sound brutal as a conclusion, but we must admit that there are numerous times when we have to make Augustine's words our own: "You were with me, and I was not with you." Apparently we are with the Lord, but in reality we are not. That is why it is necessary to enter.

To enter we must first go out. *Eisodos* demands of us a dynamic and esodic rediness. To enter our "room," our own reality, we must critically detach ourselves from everything that is not our place. Because it is so easy to live ill-situated, out of our place: a precarious, uprooted, fluctuating living. A contemporary anthropologist, the Frenchman Marc Augé, has coined a curious category: the non-place. Under this category he intends to encompass those urban spaces that are completely impersonal, intended for use but excluding any lasting form of relationship, recognition or appropriation. Non-places are also symbolic of a form of life, a style of existence, which also contaminates us. With the invitation to enter our room, Jesus challenges us to look critically at our "non-places" and find our home, our heart, our bonds of belonging, our filiation to "the Father, who is in secret."

Let us become aware of our spiritual architecture and ask ourselves: where is my room? This is God's day in your life, the here and now of the revelation of his love that visits you, that seeks and finds you even when you are lost. Our room is the perception that we are not orphans, that we have a Father, that we are children, beloved children, and that this filiation awakens us to our true

identity. As the Second Letter to the Corinthians urges, "We beseech you in the name of Christ: be reconciled to God."

***"Close the door."***

Not surprisingly, once we enter, Jesus proposes that we take another step: "Close the door." It is the second verb. The second movement of this choreography of conversion. Even inside our room we can find forms of evasion, remain in a territory of internal indefiniteness, remain with one foot in and the other out. Now, the profound encounter that the Lord asks of us, the transforming encounter to which he invites us, requires a being that is really a being, a real act of presence in which we know we are ontologically involved. And it is an act that totally mortgages our being, a total manifestation of wholeness.

Why do we have to close the door? The door is closed because the Lord asks us to be, to be what we are, in our nakedness, in our deepest truth, with no more masking or folding, in our poverty without veils, in our tension and incompleteness, in our hunger and thirst, in our desire. For only this stripping away that is experienced in the intimacy of who we are actually teaches the intimacy of God. We close the door to open, in our insufficient and wounded heart, to that trust that this love gives us. We close to open our intelligence to the science of God's love. Only then will we revitalize ourselves. Our inner health, our energy, our creativity depend on this wisdom of making even our life a life entrusted to God. Let us have no illusions: what we do not learn directly from God remains in us as ignorance. Let us dare to close the door. We will really enter into an experience of God.

We may see it as a paradox, but it is when we close the door, that is, when we expose ourselves without artifice, when we dare to present ourselves

before God as we are, that we hear Jesus knocking, "Behold: I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door for me, I will come to him, I will dine with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). For Jesus, the door is not a limitation, for, as he says in John's Gospel, he is the door: "I am the door: if any man enter in through me, he shall be saved; he shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9). When we close the door, we discover that our door is Christ. And this is, in every age, the fundamental discovery of our life. To depart and start again from Christ. This is the profound meaning of Lent.

***"And pray to your Father, who is in secret."***

The third verb is "pray," praying to the Father. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus insists against verbosity in the practice of prayer. He tells us, "In praying, do not waste words like the pagans, who think they are heard by dint of words" (Mt 6:7). In truth, one word is sufficient. The word "Father" is enough. We will pray to the Father by saying "Father," actually acknowledging Him as Father. As Jesus explains in another passage, "For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Mt 10:20). It is precisely this that we find, for example, in the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:9-13). If we analyze this prayer, we realize that argumentation is absent from it. In the Lord's Prayer there is no reasoning; everything centers around the Father. The vocative syntagma in the opening, "Our Father," is clearly the key word. It is true that we then talk about the Father's Will, the Father's Name, the Father's Kingdom, but it is always around the discovery of the Father that we keep turning. We can say that rather than praying asking for the satisfaction of this or that need, in the Lord's Prayer we ask the Father to be Father. The recipient of the prayer, the One to whom we turn, emerges as the object of the supplication itself. In Jesus, everything is marked by this consciousness of his filiation. He could truly call God "Abba" because he lived in a permanent,

desired, sought-after, deliberate, matured exercise of his filial relationship. Jesus' prayer coincides with his very existence, "Believe me: for I am in the Father, and the Father is in me" (Jn. 14:11).

Now, Jesus did not teach us a prayer: he introduced us into a relationship, and he continues to do so. Jesus ushers us into a life, gives us access to an experience. The choreography of conversion is nothing but to make this truth our own, to root ourselves in it, to make it clearer in our own existence.

May the holy time of Lent give voice to a clearer desire in us to live as children, expressing it in the revitalization of our vocation and mission, in the service of life.

