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**Woman and man: the *humanum* in its entirety**  
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*Eucharistic Celebration*

*"Therefore, choose life..."*

1. Yesterday, the Church inaugurated the holy period of Lent which helps us to prepare for the greatest solemnity of the liturgical year, the Pascal Mystery of the Lord. For each one of us, Lent offers us an eminent time for serious reflection on our lives, and it is a time to make important decisions. It is a powerful call towards a profound conversion of heart for each one of us; it is a call to reform our lives. Who here present, does not feel a great longing to change our lives, to become a better person? In fact, our sins, our infidelities, and our mediocrity weighs upon us. The time of Lent invites us to turn inwardly and to sincerely reflect upon our lives: Who am I? From where do I come? Where am I going? What is the true sense of my daily efforts and struggles ?

The symbolic rite of the imposition of ashes reminds us with stark realism that we, as mortal creatures and as sinners, are made of dust. But this is not the full truth about our human condition. In fact, the fulness of the truth is much more. It consists in the fact that he or she who is made from this "dust"- that is to say, each and every one of us- is someone who God the Father loves so much to the point of "giving us his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). This "gift of his only son" has meant, in concrete terms, his cruel death upon the Cross. It is the love of God that saves us and elevates us to a dignity beyond compare: "dust" that is transformed into sons and daughters of God. So, Lent is therefore, also a moment of great wonder before the mystery of the human person who has been created and redeemed by the love of God.

2. The time of Lent helps us experience anew God's love for us. It awakes us from our slumber of indifference, from our distractions and superficiality. The love of God for us is an immense gift. At the same time, it is also a responsibility and a challenge. Why? In order to respond to this question, we can turn to the first reading from the book of Deuteronomy. Moses asks the chosen people to

give a clear and unambiguous response to God's love for them. These people are just about to cross the border and enter into the promised land and they must decide on which side they are on: on the side of the true God or on the opposing side. Two paths lie before them from which they must choose: that of life or that of death, that of good or that of evil, that of the blessing or that of the curse... This choice also awaits us precisely because God respects our freedom. Lent is, therefore, also a time to make important decisions, those which perhaps we have been putting off for years, never having the courage to face these decisions before. Now is the acceptable time, now is a time of special grace in order to truly reform our lives. The word of God, through the mouth of Moses strongly urges us to "choose life!.." (Dt. 30:19). To choose life, for us as Christians, means giving a renewed "yes" to Christ, because only he is Lord, and only in him is the fullness of life and of happiness for which each and every human heart longs.

3. Christ is demanding. To be his disciple is not something easy. He himself tells us this in very clear words in the Gospel we just heard: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). This is the royal road that leads to the fullness of life: to follow him, the crucified and risen Lord! By our baptism, we were inserted into the life of Christ, immersed in his death and resurrection, and we have become new men and women. It is precisely this "newness" that we must give witness to as Christians.

Unfortunately, some people today erroneously consider Christianity as a religion that oppresses man, robbing him of his liberty and his desire for happiness. Nothing could be further from the truth! Pope Benedict assures us: "If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed" (24 April, 2005). Christianity is an attractive itinerary for life that is totally positive. Being a Christian does not mean having less freedom or less happiness, but rather, having infinitely more! As Blaise Pascal says, "man infinitely transcends man" (*Pensées*, 434). Christianity does not impoverish humanity, rather, it is infinitely enriching, because in Christ, the New Adam, the *humanum* reaches its absolute fullness. We as Christians must give witness to the world, that to live one's proper identity -masculine or feminine- in Christ, is both possible and beautiful. However, to do so requires a continual conversion of heart, and a constant return to the beginning, that is, to the initial pages of Genesis, when God created them "male and female", and to the "newness of life" that Christ has brought us. This is the specific contribution that we as Christians offer to today's great anthropological challenges which we are reflecting upon during this conference.