

**Homily – Ash Wednesday
Texas A&M University, San Antonio – March 2, 2022**

In the first reading, we heard it said in God's name: *“Return to me with your whole heart” (Jl)*. But do we even have the ability to return to God? God is the Most High, the Almighty, all-perfect and infinite. He also does not need anything from us and does not owe us anything. He is absolutely beyond the reach of our human capabilities. And through original sin and personal sins, we have severed our connection with Him. The ashes remind us that standing before God we are nothing but dust, and to dust we shall return.

However, Jesus revealed to us that God is also infinitely merciful. His mercy is our only hope. Only Jesus can save us. So our way back to God is not a way up – through our own achievements or human recognition – but by humbling ourselves and becoming unconditional followers of Jesus. The right attitude we must have is the one described in the psalm just prayed for us: *“Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.”* We need to be brought up by God's love.

We need to be saved and we have indeed been saved! We must open our eyes to see the light shine ever brighter. The Lenten season takes advantage of the progressive lengthening of days – as winter ends and spring begins – to highlight the meaning of our Christian path. Lent is the time to come out of our comfort zones through fasting, abstinence from meat, and other sacrifices. Catholics do not love pain, quite on the contrary. The more we become aware of God's mercy for us, the more we suffer from anything hurting us or anyone else, as we become more aware that it displeases God to see anyone in pain.

But as we humble ourselves through penance, prayer and almsgiving, we are also preparing the ground for new life to blossom, with the help of the growing light and warmth brought by the saving power of Christ. The Pope reminds us that *“The first to sow is God himself, who with great generosity continues to sow abundant seeds of goodness in our human family. ... By making good use of the present time, we too can sow seeds of goodness. This call to sow goodness should not be seen as a burden but a grace, whereby the Creator wishes us to be actively united with his own bountiful goodness. ... When we sow for the benefit of others, we share in God’s own benevolent love.”* The Pope invites us to not grow tired of praying, of uprooting evil from our lives and of doing good in active charity towards our neighbors.

Martin Luther King often said that not only hate is evil, but so is indifference. The less importance we give ourselves, the greater room we will make for God’s light to manifest itself through us. Even if we see evil as far as Russia and the Ukraine, the solution for the whole world begins in my own heart and yours. We all have a duty to participate in the promotion of peace and the common good through prayer, as well as works of mercy and active civic engagement.

Let the Holy Spirit stir up in you a contrite, humble and repentant heart. Pope Francis has stressed that *“Once again the peace of all is threatened by partisan interests.”* Synodality is the way of witness put forth by the Church, through which we can set an example of how self-interest and personal agendas are overcome, as differences are turned to the advantage of collaboration and unity.

Our Lady of Guadalupe, Virgin most merciful, Queen of peace, on this day of prayer and fasting for world peace, pray for us.