“ADAM, WHERE ARE YOU?” This is the first question that God addresses to man after sin. “Where are you Adam?” Adam is disoriented and has lost his place in creation because he thought to become powerful, to dominate everything, to be God. And harmony was broken, the man erred – and this is repeated even in relations with his neighbour, who is no longer a brother to be loved, but simply someone who disturbs my life, my well-being. And God puts the second question: “CAIN, WHERE IS YOUR BROTHER?” The dream of being powerful, of being as great as God, even of being God, leads to a chain of errors that is a chain of death, leads to shedding the blood of the brother!

These two questions resonate even today, with all their force! So many of us, even including myself, are disoriented, we are no longer attentive to the world in which we live, we don’t care, we don’t protect that which God has created for all, and we are unable to care for one another. And when this disorientation assumes worldwide dimensions, we arrive at tragedies like the one we have seen.

“Where is your brother?” the voice of his blood cries even to me, God says. This is not a question addressed to others: it is a question addressed to me, to you, to each one of us. These our brothers and sisters seek to leave difficult situations in order to find a little serenity and peace, they seek a better place for themselves and for their families – but they found death. How many times to those who seek this not find understanding, do not find welcome, do not find solidarity! And their voices rise up even to God!

“Where is your brother?” Who is responsible for this blood? Today no one in the world feels responsible for this; we have lost the sense of fraternal responsibility; we have fallen into the hypocritical attitude of the priest and of the servant of the altar that Jesus speaks about in the parable of the Good Samaritan: We look upon the brother half dead by the roadside, perhaps we think “poor guy,” and we continue on our way, it’s none of our business; and we feel fine with this. We feel at peace with this, we feel fine! The culture of well-being, that makes us think of ourselves, that makes us insensitive to the cries of others, that makes us live in soap bubbles, that are beautiful but are nothing, are illusions of futility, of the transient, that brings indifference to others, that brings even the globalization of indifference. In this world of globalization we have fallen into a globalization of indifference. We are accustomed to the suffering of others, it doesn’t concern us, it’s none of our business.

The globalization of indifference makes us all “unnamed,” leaders without names and without faces. “Adam, where are you?” “Where is your brother?” These are the two questions that God puts at the beginning of the story of humanity, and that He also addresses to the men and women of our time, even to us. But I want to set before us a third question: “WHO AMONG US HAS WEPT FOR THESE THINGS, AND THINGS LIKE THIS?” Who has wept for the deaths of these brothers and sisters? Who has wept for the people who suffer? For those caught in the pain of war and hunger, of disease and isolation? We are a society that has forgotten the experience of weeping, of “suffering with”: the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to
weep! In the Gospel we have heard the cry, the plea, the great lament: “Rachel weeping for her children . . . because they are no more.” Herod sowed death in order to defend his own well-being, his own soap bubble. And this continues to repeat itself. Let us ask the Lord to wipe out [whatever attitude] of Herod remains in our hears; let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty in the world, in ourselves, and even in those who anonymously make socio-economic decisions that open the way to tragedies like this.

O Lord, even today let us hear your questions: “Adam, where are you?” “Where is the blood of your brother?” Amen.

Biblical Reflection for Ash Wednesday – February 18, 2015

On Ash Wednesday the Church begins her great Lenten journey with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. For centuries, Lent has been a very intense spiritual journey and experience for the followers of Jesus Christ. Why are there 40 days in Lent? It took 40 days for sinfulness to drown in the flood before a new creation could inherit the earth. It took 40 years for the generation of slaves to die before the freeborn could enter the Promised Land. For 40 days Moses, Elijah and Jesus fasted and prayed to prepare themselves for a life’s work. Lent invites us to turn from our own selves, from our sin, to come together in community. Self-denial is the way we express our repentance. Self-denial is threefold, advises Matthew’s Gospel.

We pray: “Go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private.”

We fast: “No one must see you are fasting but your Father.”

We give alms: “Keep your deeds of mercy secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.”

The central theme of Pope Francis’ Lenten message this year is indifference, a topic that the Holy Father has addressed on a number of occasions. Indifference is an important concept to explain the different phenomena of the modern world. One of the most significant moments when Pope Francis spoke of this indifference was during his short but highly significant visit to the island of Lampedeusa, off the coast of Sicily, in July 2013. There he spoke of “the globalization of indifference,” not merely as a geographical phenomenon, but also a cultural one. The Lenten season is always a time of conversion, change and renewal. It is a time for overcoming this globalization of indifference and entering into a new phase in which we recognize the difference between the self and the other, between one lifestyle and another, between oneself and God. This year’s Lenten Message presents three areas in which indifference must be overcome: the Church, the community and the individual.

Pope Francis speaks about the necessary conversion and the new heart that can beat within us. The key step in all social reconstruction and cultural renewal is change in the individual. The Gospel provides the keys for achieving this change in the person, which then affects the whole social fabric. Pope Francis warns however that conversion does not have its purpose in a better society, but in the knowledge of Christ and in becoming like Him.
We can see clearly in Pope Francis’ teaching that he calls us to go beyond a faith that serves only to care for oneself and one’s own well-being. Indifference stems from an attitude to life in which otherness does not make a difference and so each person withdraws into himself. Faith also can become instrumental in this search for self. Our path, Francis explained, must take us further, “beyond ourselves”, so that we “live our faith by looking at Christ and in Him we find the Father and brothers and sisters who await us”.

Indifference to our neighbour and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians. Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience.

God is not indifferent to our world; he so loves it that he gave his Son for our salvation. In the Incarnation, in the earthly life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, the gate between God and man, between heaven and earth, opens once for all. The Church is like the hand holding open this gate, thanks to her proclamation of God’s word, her celebration of the sacraments and her witness of the faith which works through love (cf. Gal 5:6). But the world tends to withdraw into itself and shut that door through which God comes into the world and the world comes to him. Hence the hand, which is the Church, must never be surprised if it is rejected, crushed and wounded.

God’s people, then, need this interior renewal, lest we become indifferent and withdraw into ourselves.

Indifference must also be overcome in Christian communities, which are required to be “islands of mercy in a world dominated by the globalization of indifference.” The Christian community can already overcome this indifference, it can show the world that one can live differently and that it can become the city on a hill mentioned in the Gospel. Beginning with this Lent season, Christian community life, where one lives for the other, can be not merely a vague dream but instead a living reality; rather than a distant dream, a living sign of the presence of God’s mercy in Christ.

It is clear that our indifference may also manifest itself in a variety of ways. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis lists just some of the ways in which indifference to our calling and to its responsibilities and blessings may impact our world and its journey toward the Kingdom.

He writes: “Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality. Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.
Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a “throw away” culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers”.

In this context, some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting. To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.

One cause of this situation is found in our relationship with money, since we calmly accept its dominion over ourselves and our societies. The current financial crisis can make us overlook the fact that it originated in a profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person! We have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Ex 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings; man is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption.

While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. Consequently, they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control. A new tyranny is thus born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules. Debt and the accumulation of interest also make it difficult for countries to realize the potential of their own economies and keep citizens from enjoying their real purchasing power. To all this we can add widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion, which have taken on worldwide dimensions. The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits. In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule.
Behind this attitude lurks a rejection of ethics and a rejection of God. Ethics has come to be viewed with a certain scornful derision. It is seen as counterproductive, too human, because it makes money and power relative. It is felt to be a threat, since it condemns the manipulation and debasement of the person. In effect, ethics leads to a God who calls for a committed response which is outside the categories of the marketplace. When these latter are absolutized, God can only be seen as uncontrollable, unmanageable, even dangerous, since he calls human beings to their full realization and to freedom from all forms of enslavement. Ethics – a non-ideological ethics – would make it possible to bring about balance and a more humane social order. With this in mind, I encourage financial experts and political leaders to ponder the words of one of the sages of antiquity: “Not to share one’s wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs”.[55]

58. A financial reform open to such ethical considerations would require a vigorous change of approach on the part of political leaders. I urge them to face this challenge with determination and an eye to the future, while not ignoring, of course, the specifics of each case. Money must serve, not rule! The Pope loves everyone, rich and poor alike, but he is obliged in the name of Christ to remind all that the rich must help, respect and promote the poor. I exhort you to generous solidarity and to the return of economics and finance to an ethical approach which favours human beings.

Today in many places we hear a call for greater security. But until exclusion and inequality in society and between peoples are reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence. The poor and the poorer peoples are accused of violence, yet without equal opportunities the different forms of aggression and conflict will find a fertile terrain for growth and eventually explode. When a society – whether local, national or global – is willing to leave a part of itself on the fringes, no political programmes or resources spent on law enforcement or surveillance systems can indefinitely guarantee tranquility. This is not the case simply because inequality provokes a violent reaction from those excluded from the system, but because the socioeconomic system is unjust at its root. Just as goodness tends to spread, the toleration of evil, which is injustice, tends to expand its baneful influence and quietly to undermine any political and social system, no matter how solid it may appear. If every action has its consequences, an evil embedded in the structures of a society has a constant potential for disintegration and death. It is evil crystallized in unjust social structures, which cannot be the basis of hope for a better future. We are far from the so-called “end of history”, since the conditions for a sustainable and peaceful development have not yet been adequately articulated and realized.

Today’s economic mechanisms promote inordinate consumption, yet it is evident that unbridled consumerism combined with inequality proves doubly damaging to the social fabric. Inequality eventually engenders a violence which recourse to arms cannot and never will be able to resolve. It serves only to offer false hopes to those clamouring for heightened security, even though nowadays we know that weapons and violence, rather than providing solutions, create new and more serious conflicts. Some simply content themselves with blaming the poor and the poorer countries themselves for their troubles; indulging in unwarranted generalizations, they claim that the solution is an “education” that would tranquilize them, making them tame and harmless. All this becomes even more exasperating for the marginalized in the light of the widespread and
deeply rooted corruption found in many countries – in their governments, businesses and institutions – whatever the political ideology of their leaders.”

What path, we may ask, might we choose to overcome this indifference. We only need look at this Holy Season of Lent and find a valuable tool to assist us in our task. One of the important practices during Lent is fasting. It helps us not to be reduced to pure “consumers”; it helps us to acquire the precious “fruit of the Spirit,” which is “self-control,” it predisposes us to the encounter with God. We must empty ourselves in order to be filled by God. Fasting creates authentic solidarity with millions of hungry people throughout the world. But we must not forget that there are alternative forms of fasting and abstinence from food. We can practice fasting from smoking and drinking. This not only benefits the soul but also the body. There is fasting from violent and sexual pictures that television, movies, magazines and Internet bombard us with daily as they distort human dignity. There is the fasting from condemning and dismissing others — a practice so prevalent in today’s Church.

Fasting, if it is to be effective, must not simply be directed toward “giving something up” for a relatively brief period of time only to return, at the end of that time, to old ways and old habits. Fasting involves discernment. Pope Francis, like Ignatius Loyola understands the value of discernment, not only regarding the activity of God in our daily lives but the necessity of placing everything under the authority of God’s eternal reign. Jesus said, “seek first the Kingdom”, this is a direct invitation to fast, to evaluate everything which touches our daily lives, according to the standards of the Kingdom. And, if we are in any doubt regarding those standards we need only look at the Beatitudes. Being peacemakers, seeking righteousness, being pure in heart, poor in spirit and so forth therefore demands that we look at all things in our lives and “rate” them according to their purpose and end and ask ourselves the question, “how can these things assist me in working for and bringing about the Kingdom in my life and in the lives of others. To the extent that the things of this world participate in that venture to that extent we employ them. Discernment therefore, is the process of determining the value of things in light of the Kingdom.

“For now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!” We need Lent to help us recognize that our identity and mission are rooted in Jesus’ dying and rising. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the pillars of the Lenten journey for Christians. They help us to overcome a globalization of indifference by helping us to focus on what is real.

Lent is a time to fast from certain things, but also a time to feast on others. Fast from discontent, anger, bitterness, self-concern, discouragement, laziness, suspicion, guilt. Feast on gratitude, patience, and forgiveness, compassion for others, hope, commitment, truth, and the mercy of God. Lent is just such a time of fasting and feasting!

The biblical norm is that you can pray without fasting, but you cannot fast without praying. Jesus said to his disciples, “when you fast . . . ” (Matthew 6:17). When not if. Jesus expected that his disciples would fast. He expected that they would deny their cravings and reliance on earthly sustenance, and depend on God for their nourishment.
In the Bible, fasting is usually referred to as deliberately abstaining from food. In the tradition of the church, fasting may take the form of any type of self-denial of unnecessary foods, entertainment, or other forms of self-indulgence. Andrew Murray says, "Fasting helps to express, to deepen and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, to sacrifice ourselves, to attain what we seek for the Kingdom of God."

In order to move closer to God we must give up our own desires and seek the will of God. Pride keeps us from letting go of what we think is good and right. Fasting disciplines the body while God humbles the soul. The humbled soul is one that recognizes its sinful self and repents and turns to the Lord.

When the king of Nineveh heard Jonah's prophetic warning, he issued a proclamation to fast and repent: "Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink . . . Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways" (Jonah 3:7-8). God's response: "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened" (3:10). When God sees people truly humbling themselves, seeking God's mercy, and conforming themselves to God's will, then God may have compassion on them and forego righteous punishment.

Fasting is not meant to force the hand of God; in no way does fasting manipulate God. Rather, as Isaiah chapter 58 makes clear, fasting or self-humiliation in and of itself is meaningless without also pursuing God's will. We would do well to consider this as a warning when it comes to placing ourselves in positions of "bargaining" with God regarding giving up something. We might think ourselves valiant in the face of such self-denial and even expect some "congratulations" from God or on the other hand, run to confession when we have failed to keep this promise. Both I submit flow out of pride and reflect the fact that we no nothing of the biblical practice of fasting and its purpose regarding discernment. We need to think long and hard about this in order to gain the most from it while at the same time keep ourselves but getting caught up in a game of one-up-man-ship between ourselves and God. If our fasting leads to true repentance, i.e. a first purpose of amendment then we have truly uncovered a fount of grace in which to find cleansing and healing. If it does not then we are wasting our time.

Interestingly enough this "game" we are likely to play may be a direct result of avoiding what we have just heard of our Holy Father's message about indifference. In order to appear caring we might indeed focus our attention on ourselves as if Lent we a singular assignment from God to determine whether or not we are worthy of his attention. In point of fact, Lent is a community effort in which the whole church embarks on a process of prayer, fasting and works of mercy with special intensity to remove the focus from itself and put it precisely where it belongs, on the least of the brother and sisters and therefore, on the Lord.