

Christian Factors  
(Anerio)  
ABB-E-14  
1<sup>3</sup>

As Lent began last week, and this is my first chance of talking with you in this season of penance and preparation, a break this week from the letter of Pope John Paul, about the mercy of God, which I've been presenting to you recently in these programmes. Instead, let's think and pray a bit about Lent and its meaning. Not that this is, in fact, a complete change of topic: God's mercy, loving kindness, commitment to his creation and his people is very much the meaning of Lent too. For isn't it a time of repentance and conversion, our grace-given response to the mercy of God towards us? Aren't we preparing to celebrate Easter, the passion & cross of Christ, and His Resurrection, those events which focus in clearest light the depth and breadth of God's love for humankind seen in the human life of Jesus? Ash Wednesday, too: the ceremony and symbolism of ashes is, probably, the best known - about sign of Lent - though perhaps the words <sup>long</sup> associated with the placing of ashes on one's forehead (Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return), those words don't reveal the whole symbolism intended - may, perhaps, have given you an emphasis on creation and judgement which distract from other aspects. The alternative words now provided (Turn away from sin, and believe the Gospel) draw more attention to the penitential symbol of the ashes, to repentance and conversion to God, to receive His mercy. There's another aspect too that's worth recalling - an old traditional one that's dropped out of practice but (in ages perhaps more in tune and familiar with the Bible) understood that phrase "Remember man" very much more as equivalent to 'Turn away from sin'.

I mean that the reference was to the expulsion of Adam-Eve from the garden of Eden, and Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, was a liturgy of symbolic 'expulsion' from the church of those publicly-confessed sinners who would be making public penance during the whole of Lent before being 'received back', 'reconciled', 'forgiven' in the liturgical ceremony of Holy Thursday. So Lent also suggests a time for doing penance, for feeling the alienation and separateness from the body of Christ that sin creates: a time for preparing in solitude for the re-union that Easter is. To use a meaning of 'ashes' which is maybe more familiar in everyday speech: when your hopes and dreams and pleasures, what you've set your heart on, has turned to ashes, then you're free, to turn towards God and experience His mercy, be received into His company: your isolation can become a true communion. Lent as a time of spiritual retreat, withdrawal, the voluntary solitude with God in a desert place, is of course suggested by the gospel description of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and praying - which in turn has links with the Old Testament story of the 40 years God's people travelled in the desert, in which the covenant between God and His people was forged, before they reached the Promised Land. These 40 days we now mark at this season of the year have lessons and pointers for how we should pray and fast and do penance: a rich symbolism to encourage and to deepen our faith, our following of Christ, our Christian living. Think over it, as we begin our prayer together today, in this verse: *Ubi Caritas et Amor, in a setting by Francis Durufle*

Many people feel confused and uneasy about what to do for Lent. It was easier, I suppose, when the church used have strict laws about fasting and abstinence, and a strict interpretation of them was generally accepted too. Nowadays you're expected to do your own fasting and abstinence — and it's harder to do, and perhaps many of us don't do it very well if maybe at all — and feel uneasy about it. Though it's now only Ash Wednesday and Good Friday that are specified as days of fast and abstinence, how many observe even these, without forgetting or excusing themselves or asking to be dispensed? It's strange that we find such a little requirement so irksome, in a time and place where we have a much better standard of living and comfort than our predecessors did some generations ago who also observed much stricter penitential practices: and where many people take on a form of fasting and abstinence for the sake of losing weight, of health, complexion, beauty, 'back to nature'. Even if only in solidarity with the many millions of people who don't have enough to eat anyway, surely you can find your own way of fasting this Lent, of denying yourself something in penance for your sins and the sin of the world. And prayer too: a few extra minutes a day, even: something that will help heighten your expectation and preparation for Easter, and so make this a time of grace and better understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ, a person for others, in our world today.