Lent is a time to reconsider the path one is taking in life and to finally answer God’s invitation to return to him with one’s whole heart, Pope Francis said.

“Lent is not just about the little sacrifices we make, but about discerning where our hearts are directed,” he said, “toward God or toward myself?”

The pope’s remarks came in his homily at Mass Feb. 17 for Ash Wednesday. In his homily, the pope said one must bow to receive ashes sprinkled on the crown of the head, which reflects the “humble descent” one makes in reflecting on one’s life, sins and relationship with God.

“Lent is a journey of return to God,” especially when most people live each day ignoring or delaying their response to God’s invitation to pray and do something for others.

“It is a time to reconsider the path we are taking, to find the route that leads us home and to rediscover our profound relationship with God, on whom everything depends,” he said.

“The journey of Lent is an exodus from slavery to freedom,” he said, noting the easy temptations along that journey, including yearning for the past, or hindered by “unhealthy attachments, held back by the seductive snares of our sins, by the false security of money and appearances, by the paralysis of our discontents. To embark on this journey, we have to unmask these illusions.”

The way back to God, he said, starts with understanding, like the prodigal son, how “we have ended up with empty hands and an unhappy heart” after squandering God’s gifts “on paltry things, and then with seeking God’s forgiveness through confession.

The pope again reminded confessors that they must be like the father in the story of the prodigal son and not use “a whip,” but open their arms in a welcoming embrace.

“The journey is not based on our own strength. Heartfelt conversion, with the deeds and practices that express it, is possible only if it begins with the primacy of God’s work” and through his grace, the pope said.

What makes people just is not the righteousness they show off to others, “but our sincere relationship with the Father,” after finally recognizing one is not self-sufficient, but in great need of him, his mercy and grace.

The pope asked people to contemplate daily the crucified Christ and see in his wounds, “our emptiness, our shortcomings, the wounds of our sin and all the hurt we have experienced.”

“We see clearly that God points his finger at no one, but rather opens his arms to embrace us,” he said.

It is in life’s most painful wounds, that God awaits with his infinite mercy because it is there “where we are most vulnerable, where we feel the most shame” and where he comes to meet his children again.

“And now,” the pope said, “he invites us to return to him, to rediscover the joy of being loved.”

— Carol Glatz, Catholic News Service
**Upcoming Events**

### Lent with St. Joseph
**Cathedral of St. Joseph, Burlington**
7 – 8 pm
Holy Hour with the Litany of St. Joseph and spiritual reflections on St. Joseph by Brandon Schneider, seminarian. Confessions will be available during Adoration.

### Encounter Jesus Bible Study
**via Zoom • 7 - 8 pm**
Each week will focus on a different encounter with Jesus as described in the Gospels which in the words of Pope Francis, “changes our lives . . . and fills us with joy.” Hosted by Deacon Phil Lawson. [www.vermontcatholic.org/event/encounter-jesus-bible-study/all/](http://www.vermontcatholic.org/event/encounter-jesus-bible-study/all/)

### The Sacraments
**via Zoom • 7:45 - 8:45 pm**
Join Seminarian Greg Caldwell to think about and reflect upon the Seven Sacraments. For Zoom information email Greg Caldwell at gcaldwell@saintmeinrad.edu.

### Building a Culture of Encounter Through Fasting, Prayer, Almsgiving
**via Zoom • 6:30 – 8 pm**
All are welcome to attend this virtual evening of reflection and conversation, offered by Josh Perry, Director of the Office of Worship, that will help us consider anew the traditional Lenten disciplines: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Between each reflection, there will be time for conversation and questions, silent prayer and guided meditation, and music. Register at: [www.vermontcatholic.org/event/an-evening-of-reflection-building-a-culture-of-encounter-through-fasting-prayer-almsgiving/](http://www.vermontcatholic.org/event/an-evening-of-reflection-building-a-culture-of-encounter-through-fasting-prayer-almsgiving/)

### Dispel the Darkness — An Evening of Light and Hope
**Cathedral of St. Joseph, Burlington**
Come rest in the light and the hope of Christ. Whatever the darkness you may find yourself in, come discover the hope of God. Evening will include reflections and prayers led by Deacon Phil Lawson, with music by Bill Gavin. There will be adoration, the Luminous Mysteries of the rosary and an opportunity for confession. This event will be live streamed for those who are unable to attend in person.

### Saints and Sinners
**via Zoom • 7:30 - 8:30 pm**
Sinners as saints? Join us as we look at the lives of four saints and how his or her life can inspire us to live the plan God has for each one of us. There will be time for prayer and discussion with your hosts Michael Hagan and Terri McCormack. All are welcome! Register at: [www.vermontcatholic.org/event/saints-and-sinners](http://www.vermontcatholic.org/event/saints-and-sinners)

### 2021 National Catholic Women’s Conference
**Online**
What if you could be at peace most of the time? Discover women just like you sharing similar struggles, and learn how they’re finding freedom in faith. Learn how prayer enhances your vocation as a mother, spouse, professional, and friend. Experience how God Multiplies our time and energy when we make prayer a priority. Learn how to stop wasting time and energy on guilt, comparison, and resentment and become fully alive as a Catholic Woman. This virtual retreat will have live speakers, prayer rooms, and you will have access to 40+ speakers with a free weekend pass by registering for free: [go.virtualcatholicconference.com/NCWC2021](http://go.virtualcatholicconference.com/NCWC2021)

### Christ Our Hope
**2020 BISHOP’S ANNUAL APPEAL**

**Goal:** $2,651,157

85%  As of Feb. 17, 2021:  
$2,258,363

**Goal:** $9,582,456

45%  As of Feb. 17, 2021:  
$4,333,569

[Christourhopevt.org](http://Christourhopevt.org)