Spirituality

Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis greets the crowd during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Feb. 14. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Lent is a time for Christians to get their hearts in sync with the heart of Jesus, Pope Francis said.

"Let the Lord heal the wounds of sin and fulfill the prophecy made to our fathers: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh,'" the pope said Feb. 14, celebrating Mass and distributing ashes at the beginning of Lent.

After a brief prayer at the Benedictine's Monastery of St. Anselm, Francis made the traditional Ash Wednesday procession to the Dominican-run Basilica of Santa Sabina on Rome's Aventine Hill for the Mass.

He received ashes on his head from 93-year-old Cardinal Jozef Tomko, titular cardinal of the basilica, and he distributed ashes to the cardinals present, three Benedictines, three Dominicans, an Italian couple with two children and members of the Pontifical Academy for Martyrs, which promotes the traditional Lenten "station church" pilgrimage in Rome.

In his homily, he said the church gives Christians the 40 days of Lent as a time to reflect on "anything that could dampen or even corrode our believing heart."

Everyone experiences temptation, the pope said. Lent is a time to pause and step back from situations that lead to sin, a time to see how God is at work in others and in the world and, especially, a time to return to the Lord, knowing that his mercy is boundless.

Lent, he said, is a time "to allow our hearts to beat once more in tune with the vibrant heart of Jesus."

Hitting the reset button, the pope said, requires taking a pause from "bitter feelings, which never get us anywhere" and from a frantic pace of life that leaves too little

time for family, friends, children, grandparents and God.

People need to pause from striving to be noticed, from snooty comments and "haughty looks," he said; instead, they need to show tenderness, compassion and even reverence for others.

"Pause for a little while, refrain from the deafening noise that weakens and confuses our hearing, that makes us forget the fruitful and creative power of silence," the pope said.

Use the pauses of Lent "to look and contemplate," he suggested. Christians can learn from seeing the gestures others make that "keep the flame of faith and hope alive."

"Look at faces alive with God's tenderness and goodness working in our midst," the pope said, pointing to the faces of families who struggle to survive yet continue to love, the wrinkled faces of the elderly "that reflect God's wisdom at work" and the faces of the sick and their caregivers who "remind us that the value of each person can never be reduced to a question of calculation or utility."

"See the remorseful faces of so many who try to repair their errors and mistakes, and who from their misfortune and suffering, fight to transform their situations and move forward," Francis said.

But most of all, he said, "see and contemplate the real face of Christ crucified out of love for everyone, without exception. For everyone? Yes, for everyone. To see his face is an invitation filled with hope for this Lenten time, in order to defeat the demons of distrust, apathy and resignation.

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The invitation, he said, is to "return without fear to those outstretched, eager arms of your Father, who is rich in mercy, who awaits you."

"Return without fear to join in the celebration of those who are forgiven," the pope said. "Return without fear to experience the healing and reconciling tenderness of God."