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Pope Francis, wearing purple over his normal white, reaches towards a woman's forehead

Pope Francis gives ashes to a woman as he celebrates Ash Wednesday Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in this file photo from Feb. 10, 2016. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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Tradition is a source of inspiration for seeking out new paths to take with Jesus and for avoiding the traps of stagnation or impromptu experimentation, Pope Francis said.

"Jesus is himself the way, and therefore, both in the liturgical journey (of Lent) and in the journey of the synod, the church does nothing other than enter ever more deeply and fully into the mystery of Christ the savior," the pope said in his message for Lent, which begins Feb. 22 for Latin-rite Catholics.

Released by the Vatican Feb. 17, the text of the pope's message focused on seeing Lenten penance and the synodal experience both as arduous journeys that lead to the wondrous experience of Christ's divine light and splendor.

"Lenten penance is a commitment, sustained by grace, to overcoming our lack of faith and our resistance to following Jesus on the way of the cross," he said.

The Gospel accounts of the transfiguration of Christ offer an illustration of this, he said.

Jesus led three of his disciples to Mount Tabor to pray after they failed to understand and accept the reality of his coming passion and death on the cross. On the mountaintop they witnessed his face shine "like the sun" and his clothes become "white as light," and they heard a voice from a cloud proclaiming Jesus as the "beloved Son" of God.

"The disciples' experience on Mount Tabor was further enriched when, alongside the transfigured Jesus, Moses and Elijah appeared, signifying respectively the law and the prophets," the pope said.

"The newness of Christ is at the same time the fulfillment of the ancient covenant and promises; it is inseparable from God's history with his people and discloses its deeper meaning," he said. "In a similar way, the synodal journey is rooted in the church's tradition and at the same time open to newness."

Therefore, he said, "tradition is a source of inspiration for seeking new paths and for avoiding the opposed temptations of immobility and improvised experimentation."

"To deepen our knowledge of the Master, to fully understand and embrace the mystery of his salvation, accomplished in total self-giving inspired by love, we must allow ourselves to be taken aside by him and to detach ourselves from mediocrity and vanity," the pope said.

"We need to set out on the journey, an uphill path that, like a mountain trek, requires effort, sacrifice and concentration," he said. "These requisites are also important for the synodal journey which, as a church, we are committed to making."

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"During any strenuous mountain trek, we must keep our eyes firmly fixed on the path; yet the panorama that opens up at the end amazes us and rewards us by its grandeur," Francis wrote.

In the same way, "the synodal process may often seem arduous, and at times we may become discouraged," he said, "yet what awaits us at the end is undoubtedly something wondrous and amazing, which will help us to understand better God's will and our mission in the service of his kingdom."

Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, presented the Lenten message at a Vatican news conference.

Lent is a time for Catholics to "work on ourselves" and understand that a "change of mentality -- conversion -- and the communal nature of human life are blessed labors, on which depends 'something wonderful and surprising' for this broken world," the cardinal said.

"If we want a Lent of charity, if we believe that prayer and fasting have real effects on the world," he said, "we must broaden the idea of almsgiving to something larger, namely the biblical idea of restitution."

"The path is the mission. And the mission is charity, which calls into question an organization of the world and of the church that may seem unchangeable, but is changeable, because it is the outcome of decisions, of freedom," he said.

When asked about the role of fasting as a form of penance, Czerny said fasting also has a positive side in that it is a form of "liberation and a gesture of solidarity with those who have nothing to eat."

"In fact, we eat too much and, perhaps, irresponsibly, so fasting reorients us toward a way of eating and drinking that is more in tune with our vocation" as followers of Christ, he said.

The cardinal also said the dicastery would be relaunching elements of the pope's message each week over the 40-day period of Lent to help parishes live their own "transfiguration" in a more practical way.

People are encouraged to follow the #Lent2023 campaign on the dicastery's Twitter and Instagram accounts and download new materials each week from its website: humandevelopment.va.