

ASH WEDNESDAY | FEBRUARY 18, 2026

ENCOUNTER JESUS:

Listening with the Heart

2026 LENTEN PASTORAL NOTE

By Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila
Archbishop Emeritus of Denver



My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we begin this holy season of Lent on Ash Wednesday, the Church marks our foreheads with ashes and speaks the ancient words: “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” These words are not merely a ritual formula; they are a personal invitation. Lent is a time of conversion, a time to return to the Lord with all our hearts.

This Lent is unique for us in the Archdiocese of Denver. In God’s Providence, we are living through a moment of transition in episcopal leadership. The Lord, who is always faithful to his Church, has blessed us with a new shepherd, Archbishop-designate James R. Golka. Transitions can stir many emotions: gratitude, hope, uncertainty, even a sense of loss. Yet they can also bring moments of grace. They remind us that the Church belongs not to any one man, but to Jesus Christ. He is the Good Shepherd who never ceases to guide his flock.

In his Lenten message this year, *Listening and Fasting: Lent as a Time of Conversion*, Pope Leo XIV reminds us that conversion begins with making room for the Word of God through listening. He points to the importance of attentive, reverent listening, first to God, and then to one another. Before we speak, before we act, before we attempt to solve problems or defend positions, we are called first to listen.

Sacred Scripture shows us a God who listens. At the burning bush, the Lord says to Moses, “I have witnessed the affliction of my people ... I have heard their cry” (Exodus 3:7). Our God is not distant or indifferent. He hears. He sees. He knows. He loves us even when we are far from him. Divine listening precedes divine action.

And if God listens to us, how much more must we learn to listen to him first before we speak or act?

Lent invites us to create space for this listening. In a world filled with noise — constant news, endless commentary, social media and hurried conversations — silence can feel uncomfortable. Yet silence is the soil in which the Word of God takes root. Without silence, the Word remains on the surface of our lives. With silence, it penetrates our hearts.

When you pray with the Gospels this Lent, I encourage you to ask: *Do I hear Jesus speaking to me personally?* When he addresses the disciples, the crowds, the sick, the sinners, do I also recognize that he is speaking to me, in a deeply personal way?

Is Jesus the one who is my true teacher, forming my heart and mind? Is he enlightening my decisions, not only in church, but also in my family life, my work, my friendships,

how I treat my enemies and those who persecute me, my use of time and resources? Or do I listen more attentively to the voices of culture, politics, the evil one or my personal preference?

Conversion begins when we allow Jesus to become more than just an admired figure or distant Lord. It begins when we allow him to speak directly to our lives, and when we are willing to obey.

The Holy Father also suggests a striking and challenging form of fasting this Lent: fasting from harmful or careless language. Words have immense power. With them we bless, and with them we wound. We build up, and we tear down.

Perhaps this Lent, as the Holy Father wisely recommends, we can fast from criticism, sarcasm, gossip, cynicism and harsh judgments. Perhaps we can fast from the quick retort and the defensive reply. In their place, we can choose words of encouragement, patience and truth spoken in charity, especially with those we disagree with.

Such a fast requires interior conversion. It demands that we examine not only what we say, but also what fills our hearts, for as the Lord teaches, “from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). When our hearts are close to Jesus, our words begin to resemble his: merciful, truthful and life-giving.

The more intimate we become with Christ, the more we are freed from sin. Through relationship with Jesus, we experience more than mere self-improvement. We allow Jesus to love us and to heal us in his grace, rather than our own willpower. As we draw near to him in prayer, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and in the Eucharist, we find that our attachments to earthly things and behaviors begin to loosen. What once seemed irresistible begins to lose its power.

This is the heart of Lent: deeper friendship with Jesus.

In this season, I encourage every family and parish in our Archdiocese to take up concrete practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Spend time each day with the Word of God. Approach the Sacrament of Confession with renewed trust. Attend Mass not out of obligation, but with a longing to worship the Father and to receive the One who gives himself completely for you. Consciously offer your life with the one sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross to the Father.

Finally, to learn to pray from the heart, do not be afraid to ask Jesus for a deeper faith, trust and confidence in him. The simple prayer we find in the Gospel, “I do believe, help my unbelief” (Matthew 9:24), can be made by every disciple.

At Sunday Mass, we recite the Creed together. These words unite us with the universal Church across time and space. Those words can be simply said, or they can be deeply personal, to speak it to the Lord from our hearts.

Perhaps in your prayer this Lent, you might try to pray the Creed in your own words. Translating the Church's words of the Creed into the language of your own heart, offered to the Lord, is a powerful way to grow in relationship with him. For example, I might pray:

*“Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God.
Jesus, I believe that you are the Word made flesh.
Jesus, I believe that you died for my sins and rose to give me new life.
Jesus, I believe that you are truly present in the Eucharist.
Jesus, I trust that you are guiding your Church and leading me.
Jesus, I trust in you.
Jesus, I surrender myself to you.
Jesus, I love you.
Jesus, I give you my heart.
Amen.”*

You'll notice this prayer closely echoes the Creed; what would your version of it sound like to the Lord?

When we speak to him in this way — personally, sincerely — our faith becomes real in each of our lives. No longer an abstract formula, faith becomes a relationship based on encounter.

In closing, as we journey together through this holy season, let us entrust ourselves to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who listened perfectly to the Word, allowed it to become flesh within her and stood faithfully at the foot of the Cross. May she teach us to listen with open hearts, to trust in God's Providence and to offer our own faithful “yes.” May this Lent be a true time of conversion for each of us and for our archdiocese, so that in this season of transition and grace we may grow in deeper faith, firmer hope and more ardent charity and find our hearts renewed by the mercy of Christ.

With gratitude for your faith and with my heartfelt prayers for each of you, I remain
Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila
Archbishop Emeritus of Denver

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