

Due to the ongoing pandemic, this Ash Wednesday might seem a little different to most if not all American Catholics. The reason I say this is that in response to the ongoing pandemic the Congregation for Divine Worship has decreed that instead of the customary black cross of ashes on our foreheads for Ash Wednesday, American Catholics, indeed all Catholics throughout the world, will have the crown of our heads sprinkled with ashes along with the customary words, “Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.”

This will seem like a strange new invention to most American Catholics when that is actually far from the truth. As I say this, I can’t help but think of when I helped distribute ashes at St. Peter’s Basilica many years ago. As I was distributing ashes, I started realizing that everyone I gave ashes to was looking at me very confused so I started trying to scan the crowd and the priests around me to see what I was doing wrong. Quickly I realized that the only penitents walking away with foreheads marked with a cross of ashes were mine. All of the other priests present in the Basilica were simply sprinkling ashes across the tops of the heads of those present.

In the same way that those Catholics were staring at me in confusion as I gave them ashes in a way different from what they were used to, many American Catholics today will be staring at their priest in confusion as he gives them ashes in a way that they are not used to as well. This shouldn’t be taken to mean that one way is right or wrong or one way is better than the other. Rather, they are simply different symbols that evoke different meanings. Those Catholics in St. Peter’s Basilica walked away confused when I gave them ashes because the symbol had no meaning for them. Likewise, we are confused by the simple sprinkling of ashes across our heads because that symbol of faith to which we are accustomed has been changed.

Luckily, what we can take away from this is the fact that both of these ways of applying ashes are rich in symbolism and as American Catholics we must allow

this perhaps jarring experience to enter us into Lent in a new and powerful way as we experience and create new symbols of faith together. As I personally tried to ponder this unfamiliar gesture of simply sprinkling ashes over the crown of someone's head and what it might mean to me, I couldn't help but be reminded of the countless times that I have sprinkled dust across the top of someone's coffin as their body is being laid to rest in the earth. In this way, the haunting words of today's liturgy take on an even more profound meaning. "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return."

This reveals one of the ways that this simple sprinkling of ashes can become for us a rich symbol as we enter into the season of Lent, a reminder of that day when we too shall be returned to the earth from which we came. For this reason, the words from the prophet Joel should be especially meaningful to us. "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment." For on a day and time we do not know, our Lord will come for us and woe for us if He does not find us ready.

The prophet Joel makes it clear that the first step in this journey of preparing for our eventual death is returning to the Lord with our whole heart. As Catholics, we are accustomed to using the season of Lent as a time of fasting and preparation, and this is a good thing, but all of this can be worthless if we do not first and foremost take a moment to pause and reflect on our sinfulness so that we might repent from our sins and return to the Lord with all of our hearts.

Those who are familiar with the Total Consecration to Mary according to St. Louis De Montfort know that the second week consists of reflecting on one's own sinfulness and need for God's grace. To assist us in this, St. Louis says that, "we can,

if we choose, meditate on our inward corruption... We can look upon ourselves, during these days, as snails, crawling things... serpents, and unclean animals; or we can reflect on the three considerations of St. Bernard: the vileness of our origins, the dishonors of our present state, and our ending as food for worms.”

I must admit that these harsh words of St. Louis and St. Bernard sound extreme and hard to put into practice. I want to think of myself as a good person and I sometimes already struggle to recognize God’s great love for me. So it is difficult to confront my own sinfulness in such a frank and stark manner. And yet, the point of this is not to wallow in self-pity or to convince ourselves that we are beyond redemption. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The point is to realize that we are sinners in need of a Savior so that we might repent of our sinfulness and return to the Lord with all of our hearts.

In this, the spiritual practices of Lent are revealed for what they truly should be. The practices of Lent are not meant to be ways to punish ourselves for our sinfulness. Nor are they meant to be ways to earn God’s grace. Salvation is not something which can be “earned” by our own merits, but it is instead something offered to us which must be accepted. The spiritual practices of Lent are a way to turn away from our sinfulness and our attachments to the things of this world so that we might in turn embrace the things of God, the great gift of salvation which we have been offered.

Think again to the traditional practices of Lent: prayer and fasting and almsgiving. All three of these things are meant to turn us away from ourselves towards God. Prayer turns us away from our self-focus by opening our hearts in a deepening relationship with God as we entrust our fears and needs, our hopes and dreams, even our very selves into God’s provident and loving hands. Fasting turns us away from self-focus as we carve those things out of our lives that we don’t really

need so that we might make more space for God in our lives. As we do this, we become freer from the things of this world and less hesitant to share the gifts that God has given us with others. In this sense, prayer and fasting lead us directly into almsgiving as we stop focusing on ourselves and our own needs to share what we have with those around us who are less fortunate than us.

As Jesus tells us in today's Gospel, "take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father." Jesus goes on to counsel us to pray in secret instead of praying in a way focused on gaining the praise of others. We are to fast so that no one knows that we are fasting but our Father who sees us in secret. When we give alms, we are to do it in secret so that our Father may repay us in secret. To put it more simply, these practices of prayer and fasting and almsgiving are not to be done so that we might be glorified in this world but so that our Father might glorify us in the world to come as we store up treasures in heaven.

Everything that we do throughout the entire season of Lent must be aimed at this end goal of making it into heaven when we die. As we know, this is not an easy thing but a trick of the saints might help us in this endeavor. I am sure that most of us are familiar with seeing depictions of the saints with a skull nearby. This is a reference to a penitential practice called "memento mori", remember your death, in which you reflect on a skull or some other object that reminds you that of your coming death so that, as St. Bernard so chillingly said, we remember that we will one day end as food for worms. In this way, we become reminded to prepare every single day for our own future deaths so that we might become saints as well.

So, whether we are among those who will be able to visit churches today to have ashes sprinkled on our foreheads or whether we will have to celebrate this Ash Wednesday in the silence of our own homes, we are all invited to reflect in the

silence of our own hearts on our own future deaths... that simple fact that “we are dust and unto dust we shall return” so that we might use this season of Lent to prepare our hearts for our true home in heaven.