

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Some years ago there was a movie titled ASH WEDNESDAY. It starred Elizabeth Taylor, playing an aging woman who wants to be restored to the beauty of her youth. In pursuit of her obsession, she boards a plane to Switzerland, where she undergoes extensive plastic surgery. The doctor has promised her that afterwards she will look twenty years younger.

Following the surgery, with her bruised face wrapped in bandages, Taylor puts on dark sun glasses and goes out for a walk. Slowly, in great pain, she strolls the streets of Geneva. Needing a place to rest, she enters an old stone church. Taking a seat in the shadows in the back of the church, she is like a new woman waiting to emerge from a gauze cocoon. Then, an elderly priest approaches, carrying a bowl of cinders. He pauses in front of Taylor, and in a bare, uncovered place on her forehead, imposing a cross, while intoning the ancient text: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.” It is ASH WEDNESDAY!

That’s it! That is our reality! No matter what anti-aging cream we use...regardless of Botox...or the latest diet or exercise regimen that promises eternal youth, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.” For the next forty days leading up to Easter we assess our lives—40 days in remembrance of Jesus’ 40 days of temptation in the desert. During this period we are to look deeply into our lives from the perspective that our time on this earth is limited, to recognize that we are indeed mere mortals, and that there will come a point at which we will have to give an account on how we have lived our lives.

Religious people are often accused of indulging in escapism. We are, in the opinion of some, starry-eyed idealists, looking for pie in the sky. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are the only people who face the really important things in life. That is what Lent is. It begins tonight!

The alternate, perhaps more poignant, intonation that is given as the ashes are imposed on us is, “Repent and believe in the Gospel”. This is a reminder, in case we need reminding, that, not only are we mere mortals, but that we are sinners who can only hope for salvation by our acceptance of the Good News of the suffering, dying, and rising of Jesus Christ by becoming his faithful disciples.

So, for a few moments, let’s reflect on what repentance is all about. First of all we can only repent what we have done or haven’t done that we know is wrong. Therefore, we first have to acknowledge our sins. That means we have to take a good, long, hard look at ourselves—our words, our actions, our attitudes, our relationships, how we use or abuse our time, our talents, and our treasure—in light of God’s law and Gospel truth. What have I done or been doing or haven’t done that is contrary to the Commandments, Christ’s call to discipleship, or the teaching of the Church.

Here we might model our Lenten selves on the example of St. Augustine, who wrote books on the sinfulness of his life. Has anyone here ever heard of the book, which is really several books called, “The Confessions of St. Augustine”?

Perhaps each night for the first couple of weeks of Lent each of us could sit down and write out an account of sinful conditions that have arisen in our lives and what repercussions they had, not just on ourselves, but on others around us. For instance, if, in anger, you have resorted to cussing or using inappropriate language, who has been hurt by that or to whom have you provided a bad example for their own lives, like your children, or who have you scandalized and turned away from Christ or the Church, since you're supposed to be a good Catholic.

In these days of reflection on your sins don't forget your sins of omission, that are perhaps as serious as your sins of commission. The unkind word left unspoken; the unreturned-call that may have left someone feeling ignored or unloved; the selfish purchase or unwise debt that kept you from having the money to help someone in need or even supporting your Church as you should.

In the next week of Lent perhaps simply reflect on the sinful conditions, words, actions, or attitudes that you have claimed in your writing. Ask yourself if are really sorry for the harm you have done, as well as the good that you have left undone. What Gospel values could you have promoted by doing differently?

Then, resolve to confess your sins. For, without confession of them, how can you be forgiven? Only we Catholics have the opportunity to come before the Tribunal of Confession to unburden ourselves from the stench, the rot, the filth of our sins. Only we Catholics have the blessed assurance of the cleansing, already-forgiving love of God in the absolution given by the priest in Confession. Only we Catholics accept a penance before the Tribunal of Confession that is most often a simple prayer of gratitude for the saving grace of God given to us in the suffering, dying, and rising of Jesus.

But, that is not the end of repentance. There also has to be a firm purpose of amendment. That means that we will fulfill the second part of that Ash Wednesday intonation, “...believe in the Gospel.” We, in effect, amend our lives by accepting God’s grace to the extent possible undo the harm we have done by our sins, change our attitude to more truly reflect Gospel values, and go out of our way to do good for others so that they can see Christ in us.

Repentance during these forty days also is enhanced by “mortifying the flesh”. That is, by limiting ourselves to the barest essentials in the area of our creature needs—whether it be for food or drink; for pleasure or entertainment—we attest to our recognition that we are dust, and will return to dust. Using the time, energy, and financial resources saved from focusing on those creature needs to feed our spirits by more intense prayer, service, and almsgiving.

It is only in this way, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, that we become as St. Paul tells us tonight that we become “ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us.”

If I may, I add my voice to that of St. Paul, “Working together, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says: ‘In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you. Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.’”

Only in such a Lent of dying with Him to our sins, can we truly celebrate in His rising on Easter morning.

So, come, now, my mere mortal, sinful Sisters and Brothers, receive the Ashes of Repentance—and believe in the Gospel.