

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Back in the day, it was easy to identify who was Catholic on Ash Wednesday, because only Catholics got marked with the ashes. Now a number of mainline and evangelical Protestant churches have taken up the practice. So, you can't quite be sure who's who. But, the Protestants haven't figured out all of our practices yet. There was a very righteous Baptist deacon who had a little weakness for the ponies. He would go to the track every now and then and bet a modest amount on horses he believed were winners.

On a recent outing, he noticed, before the race a priest would step forward, bless a horse, and sure enough it would win. He did it a second, then a third time. Each time the blessed horse won.

On the last race of the day, our Deacon noticed the priest blessing the forehead, the mouth, the chest, and all four legs of the horse. He ran to an ATM, withdrew all his money, and put it on the horse to win. The horse took off like a bolt of lightning. The Deacon was already counting his winnings. As the horse went into the final turn, he stopped abruptly and fell over dead.

The Deacon was shocked. He couldn't believe it. He had lost everything. He ran down to the priest and asked him what happened. How could it be. All the other horses he had blessed had won their races. The priest shook his head sadly and said, "Ah, that's the problem with you Protestants. You don't know the difference between a blessing and the last rites."

That has absolutely nothing to do with anything. It's just a little funny! WELCOME TO ASH WEDNESDAY!

I find it almost providential that we celebrate this day and are called to reflect on this Gospel text on the heels of the primary contests in Iowa and New Hampshire. The exit polls (whatever they are) and the pundits are all telling us that Republican or Democrat, left or right, liberal or conservative, the majority of Americans are clamoring for authenticity in our leaders. They are telling us that we are tired of the empty promises and phony assertions. We are demanding that our leaders be honest and forthright. We are sick and tired of the hypocrisy in the system and in the leaders.

Obviously, according to our Gospel text, we are in the best of company. Jesus tells his disciples "do not perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; do not give alms to win praise of others; do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray ... so that others may see them; do not look gloomy like the hypocrites so that you appear to others to be fasting.

Our problem is this. We are right to demand authenticity from our leaders. And Jesus surely was right to condemn the practices of the hypocritical Pharisees. This is our problem. Many people regard us good, church-going people as hypocrites, because, while we talk the talk, we don't always walk the walk. Most of us don't fully live up to the teachings of Jesus Christ, whom we proclaim is our Lord and Savior.

For instance, do you pray for the Lord's forgiveness, but have someone in your heart against whom you are harboring a secret grudge? If so, you are a hypocrite!

Do you give to the church what's left over, rather than sacrificially from your substance? Hypocrite!

Do you bring your kids to PREP class so they can make their Sacraments, but not participate in Mass with them? Hypocrite!

Do you love all people as children of God, and brothers and sisters to you, or do you harbor prejudices against those who are different—racially, religiously, or ethnically? If so, you are a hypocrite?

The truth is that in some way or another we are all hypocrites. What we despise in others is all too often what we despise in ourselves. St. Paul said it best for all of us, "The good that I want, I cannot do; the evil that I do is that which I don't want. Thanks be to God for my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!"

There is a wonderful story told, called "The Happy Hypocrite". It is the story about a despicable and dissolute man named Lord George. Lord George fell in love with a beautiful woman. He knew he could not win her heart if she knew what he was really like, so over his bloated features he wore a mask—the mask of a saint. The guise worked, and he wooed and won her.

After they had been married for a while, a woman showed up from Lord George's past. She was angered by his pretending to be good! In the presence of his wife she stripped off the mask. And to her great surprise—and his—when she removed the mask of a saint, she discovered the face of a saint he had become—while wearing the mask.

Underneath the ashes we will put on this night, there will be a mask. It will not be the mask which the world thinks we are wearing, seeking to appear to be something we are not. No, it will be a mask that says, this is what I hope to become. I want to be like Jesus. And, as we wear this mask, we pray that God will transform us until we become the person we are pretending to be. We will become like Jesus.