

Preparing for Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent

"Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning..." Joel 2:12

Another year, another Ash Wednesday. As Catholics, we can sometimes lose our sense of urgency to repent and turn again to the Lord. Has your Ash Wednesday become merely a yearly ritual of going to Church and "getting your ashes?"

Today's readings proclaim a clear sense of urgency: "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart..." (Joel 2:12) "Blow the trumpet in Zion! Proclaim a fast..." (Joel 2:15) "Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2).

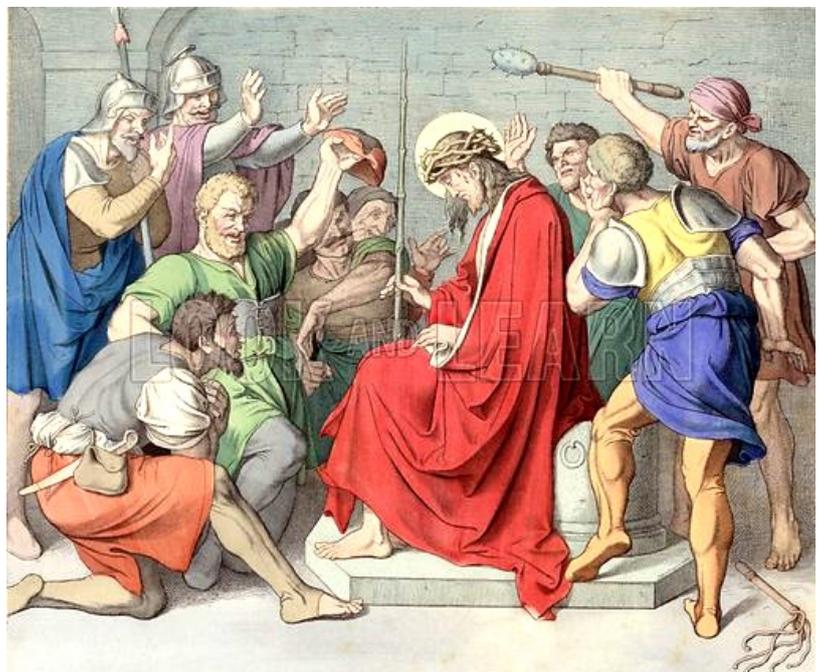
We are pilgrims. Now is not the time to rest on our laurels. Ask the Holy Spirit to breathe His fire into your heart this Lent; ask for the gift of the fear of the Lord, that you not become tepid (see Rev 3:15-17). Ask St. Faustina to walk with you this Lent, as you reflect upon the Passion of the Lord. May she intercede for you so that you might turn to the Lord anew this Lent with your whole heart.

Sacred Scriptures Readings:

- Joel 2:12-18;
- Ps 51:3-4, 5-6AB, 12-13, 14 and 17;
- 2 Cor 5:20-6:2;
- Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

Read *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, 408

"When I become immersed in the Lord's Passion, I often see the Lord Jesus, during adoration, in this manner: after the scourging, the torturers took the Lord and stripped Him of His own garment, which had already adhered to the wounds; as they took it off, His wounds reopened; then they threw a dirty and tattered scarlet cloak over the fresh wounds of the Lord. The cloak, in some places, barely reached His knees.



They made Him sit on a piece of beam. And then they wove a crown of thorns, which they put on His sacred head. They put a reed in His hand and made fun of Him, bowing to Him as to a king. Some spat in His face, while others took the reed and struck Him on the head with it. Others caused Him pain by slapping Him; still others covered His face and struck Him with their fists. Jesus bore all this with meekness. Who can comprehend Him - comprehend His suffering?

Jesus' eyes were downcast. I sensed what was happening in the most sweet Heart of Jesus at that time. Let every soul reflect on what Jesus was suffering at that moment. They tried to outdo each other in insulting the Lord. I reflected: Where does such malice in man come from? It is caused by sin. Love and sin have met. -(Diary, 408) "

REFLECTIONS ON THE SEASON OF LENT



Did you ever notice how little children always ask, “WHY?” A friend of mine with a four-year old son, asked her the other day, “Mommy, why don’t we have a maid?” I learned very quickly not to ask my grandmother, “Why?” because my grandmother’s answer to the question “Why?” was “because ‘Y’ is a crooked letter!” On Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent as we come to Church to receive the imposition of ashes on our foreheads in the sign of the Cross. Lent is a season of repentance. So “Why” do we have our foreheads marked with a cross?

Because in Sacred Scripture, a mark on the forehead is a symbol of a person's ownership. By having our foreheads marked

with the sign of a cross, this symbolizes that we belong to Jesus Christ, who died on a Cross. This is in imitation of the spiritual mark or seal that is put on a Christian in baptism, when he is delivered from slavery to sin and the devil and made a slave of righteousness and Christ (Rom. 6:3-18). It is also in imitation of the way the righteousness are described in the book of Revelation, where we read of the servants of God (the Christian faithful, as symbolized by the 144,000 male virgins): "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads" (Revelation 7:3); "[The demon locust] were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads" (Revelation 9:4); "Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads." (Revelation 14:1). This is in contrast to the followers of the beast, who have the number 666 on their foreheads or hands. The reference to the sealing of the servants of God for their protection in Revelation is an allusion to a parallel passage in Ezekiel, where Ezekiel also sees a sealing of the servants of God for their protection:

And the LORD said to him [one of the four cherubim], 'Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark [literally, "a tav"] upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.' And to the others he said in my hearing, 'Pass through the city after him, and smite; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity; slay old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one upon whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary.' So they began with the elders who were before the house"(Ezekiel 9:4-6).

Unfortunately, like most modern translations, the one quoted above (the Revised Standard Version, which we have been quoting thus far), is not sufficiently literal. What it actually says is to place a tav on the foreheads of the righteous inhabitants of Jerusalem. Tav is one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and in ancient script it looked like the Greek letter chi, which happens to be two crossed lines (like an "x") and which happens to be the first letter in the word "Christ" in Greek (christos). The Jewish rabbis commented on the connection between tav and chi and this is undoubtedly the mark Revelation has in mind when the servants of God are sealed in it. The early Church Fathers seized on this tav-chi-cross-christos connection and expounded it in their homilies, seeing in Ezekiel a prophetic foreshadowing of the sealing of Christians as servants of Christ. It is also part of the background to the Catholic practice of making the sign of the cross, which in the early centuries (as can be documented from the second century on) was practiced by using one's thumb to furrow one's brow with a small sign of the cross, like Catholic do today at the reading of the Gospel during Mass.

Why is the signing done with ashes? Because ashes are a biblical symbol of mourning and penance. Originally, in the Old Testament, the ashes were those of the animals sacrificed in the Temple for the remission of sins. The Book of Numbers recounts how these ashes were mixed with water to be sprinkled on the people, places, and things as a sign of purification. The Book of Jonah tells us that the King of Nineveh repented of his sins and sat in the ashes. One of the earliest references to Catholic liturgical use of ashes to mark the beginning of Lent dates from about 1000 AD. Since Lent is the period of repentance and purification, the Old Testament sign of ashes was used to mark the beginning of this penitential period. While we no longer normally wear sackcloth or sit in dust and ashes, the customs of fasting and putting ashes on one's forehead as a sign of mourning and penance have survived to this day.

Ashes also symbolize death and so remind us of our mortality. Thus when the priest uses his thumb to sign one of the faithful with the ashes, he says, "Remember, man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return," which is modeled after God's address to Adam (Genesis 3:19; cf. Job 34:15, Psalms 90:3, 104:29, Ecclesiastes 3:20). This also echoes the words at a burial, "Ashes to ashes; dust to dust," which is based on God's words to Adam in Genesis 3 and Abraham's confession, "I am nothing but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). It is thus a reminder of our mortality and our need to repent before this life is over and we face our Judge.

But why then do we receive them on our forehead and walk around all day with this dirty face when the Gospel tells us to wash our face? Some prayers are meant to be a private relationship between you and God, others are meant to be an outward show for others to see. Our deep intimate love, we keep in private, but if children never saw their parents kiss or hug one another how would they know that their parents love each other. We receive ashes also as an external sign to those around us. By wearing ashes, we are calling the world to repentance.

So why do we need to repent? The Greek word, for repentance, is "metanoia" and it means to "think differently" or to make 180 degree turn in our life. Where is our life going? We can only be going in one of two directions. We can either be moving toward God or away from God. If you feel distant from God or that God is not a big part of your life, guess who moved? Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said that heaven and hell begin in this life. If we choose to separate ourselves from God, if God is distant from our lives, then when we die there will be a seamless transition into hell. If, however, God is at the center of our life and everything we do, everything we say, everything we choose, is centered on God, then when we die there will be a seamless transition into heaven, with a possible pit stop in purgatory. It has been said that most people are dying to live. Jesus was living to die. Fulton Sheen would say that Jesus was the only person born with the express purpose to die. As followers of Christ, we are called to make that same sacrifice of our life to God.

What is so important about sacrifice? Sacrifice comes from two Latin words, "sacrum" and "facere." "Sacrum" means "holy" and "facere" means "to make." Therefore, "sacrum facere," sacrifice, means to make holy. During Lent we are called to make little sacrifices for the Lord. We may give up candy, or soda, or alcohol, and the Church tell us that we must give up meat on Fridays, but to be a true sacrifice we must give up something good. We cannot make a sacrifice to give up cigarettes, because smoking is bad for your health and we should not be doing it anyway. You have to sacrifice something that is good. Why? Do we have to give up something? Why can't we just do something positive? There is an old saying that "to say goodbye is to die a little."

Fasting and abstinence, (giving up some good worldly pleasure), helps us to say goodbye to this world and helps us prepare for the good things in the life to come. This is why we can never "fast" from prayer or the Sacraments. "To say goodbye is to die a little" makes us realize that giving up some good pleasure prepares us for the ultimate transition, that doorway, known as death. Death is not a state of being but a doorway to eternal life. That door opens either to heaven or to hell, depending on how we have lived in this life. Fasting and abstinence also reminds us of our death because when we fast, we become hungry and that reminds us that one day we will all die. Fulton Sheen also said that "the reason most people fear death is because they have not died yet." However, if this Lent, we truly repent, if we truly make that 180 degree turn in our thoughts and actions, if we say goodbye not only to our sins but also to some of our good pleasures then we will be preparing ourselves for entering into that great doorway of death and eternal life with the Lord Jesus. We have to LIVE remembering that we will all DIE. This is why the traditional pray for the imposition of ashes is "Remember that you are dust and unto dust you will return."

HOW TO PRAY THE CHAPLET OF THE DIVINE MERCY

1. Make the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

2. Optional Opening Prayers

You expired, Jesus, but the source of life gushed forth for souls, and the ocean of mercy opened up for the whole world. O Fount of Life, unfathomable Divine Mercy, envelop the whole world and empty Yourself out upon us.

(Repeat three times)

O Blood and Water, which gushed forth from the Heart of Jesus as a fountain of Mercy for us, I trust in You!

3. Our Father

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, Amen.

4. Hail Mary

Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen.

5. The Apostle's Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; He descended into hell; on the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from there He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

6. The Eternal Father

Eternal Father, I offer you the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Your Dearly Beloved Son, Our Lord, Jesus Christ, in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world.

7. On the Ten Small Beads of Each Decade

For the sake of His sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

8. Repeat for the remaining decades

Saying the "Eternal Father" (6) on the "Our Father" bead and then 10 "For the sake of His sorrowful Passion" (7) on the following "Hail Mary" beads.

9. Conclude with Holy God (Repeat three times)

Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

10. Optional Closing Prayer

Eternal God, in whom mercy is endless and the treasury of compassion — inexhaustible, look kindly upon us and increase Your mercy in us, that in difficult moments we might not despair nor become despondent, but with great confidence submit ourselves to Your holy will, which is Love and Mercy itself.

