

February 17, 2021 12:10 p.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

### **Ash Wednesday**

It seems that no matter when Lent begins---since it's one of those "movable Feasts" that changes from year to year---whether it comes early (as it does this year) or much later---we never seem to be quite ready for it, and we often find ourselves saying: "I can't believe it's Ash Wednesday already!".

However, this year, we might find ourselves feeling like Lent---the time for prayer and sacrifice---never really ended from last year. If you recall, it was only 2 weeks after Ash Wednesday last year that we, and most of the world, entered into a worldwide lockdown, and we spent the last 4 weeks of Lent, and the entire Easter Season, unable to go anywhere or do anything, including coming to Church. Since the Feast of Pentecost last year up until now, we have begun to see improvements, but for the most part, this year has felt like a very longggg Season of Lenten-like self-denial, sacrifice and penance.

Yet, here we are again on Ash Wednesday, having just listened to these beautiful Readings from God's Holy Word which we hear every year. We hear the same invitations---ones that our Loving God ceaselessly gives to His People: 1) as the Prophet Joel urged on God's behalf: "*Return to Me with your whole heart!*"; 2) as the Psalmist pleaded on our behalf: "*Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned*"; 3) and as St. Paul strongly encouraged us: "*We implore you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God!*"

So today Lent 2021 begins. Whether or not we've been living a "lenten-like" time of sacrifice over the better part of this year, today's observance of Ash Wednesday gives us a brand new opportunity to actually respond to God's ceaseless invitation, and find ways to "return to the Lord". Not just "return to Mass" if/when you can; not just "return to the practice of your Faith" if you've been slack in that regard; but a determination to "turn away" from sin, which separates us from God, and a subsequent "re-turn-ing" to God---turning back to a strong, vibrant intimate relationship with God.

The 40 days of Lent that start today give us the opportunity (if we're willing to make use it) to examine our bad habits, our moral weakness, our self-centeredness, and all those attitudes of mind and heart that prevent us from speaking words of kindness, understanding and compassion to those around us, or allowing the actions of our lives to be consistent with our Faith. That's what our Lenten Resolutions are for. Lent is not about giving us motivation to

drop 10 pounds, or to get ourselves back into physical shape by exercising regularly (not that either of those aren't good things to consider). Whatever our Lenten Resolutions are should be helping us to become more like Jesus.

When we stop and do that self-reflection (which we should be doing everyday), what daily practices do I see that would NOT be ones that Jesus would do? Am I harsh with people around me? Do I tend to be impatient with those in my life? Am I more apt to criticize than to complement? Do I have a "what-I-want-when-I-want-it" approach to life? Lent gives us the opportunity to make the kinds of changes in my life that I need to make, so that the way I deal with those in my life, especially those closest to me, can be more the way Jesus has shown us how to live.

As we heard in today's Gospel, Jesus teaches us that "prayer, fasting, and almsgiving or works of charity" are 3 of the traditional ways to help us to strengthen our relationship with God and with one another. But they're not to be done to impress others, but only to deepen our spiritual life.

As we begin this 40-day Season of repentance, reconciliation, and renewal, we come together to be reminded of who we are by receiving blessed ashes. As you know, this year, because of the pandemic, there are two adjustments to the way the blessed ashes will be distributed: either by sprinkling the ashes on the crown of the head (to avoid touching) or on the forehead, the practice that we're more accustomed to. The other adjustment is that the prayer calling us to repentance and the reminder of our mortality will be prayed only once, at the time of the Blessing, rather than individually to each person.

However, I think it's important to point out, especially for those who may be joining us virtually and who may not be able to actually receive their blessed ashes today, that the Ashes are a symbol; but what is most important is the "interior disposition" of each of us, whether you receive the ashes, or you don't. Whether you receive sprinkled ashes on the crown of your head, a cross on your forehead, or even if you can't receive them at all---it's the inner, spiritual movement to the Lord that matters; it the willingness to open our hearts to re-turn to our Loving God that is the most important intention for all of us on this Ash Wednesday.

During these next 40 days of Lent---this time of spiritual healing and a renewed sense of Hope---let us pray with God's grace and the faithful adherence of each of us to our Lenten Resolutions---that we will *return to the Lord with our whole heart*; that we will *be reconciled to*

*God and our neighbor; and that we will pray with all our hearts: Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.*

And while we “remember that we are dust and unto dust we will one day return”, let us never forget that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Resolving to live our lives in this world in such a way so as to live forever with Him in Heaven when our journey of Faith in this world is completed is our most important Resolution of all, and our ultimate Hope in God’s abiding Love.

God bless you, now and always!