

# Archbishop Lori's Homily - Ash Wednesday 2018

*Ash Wednesday*

*Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption/ Cathedral of Mary Our Queen  
Feb. 14, 2018*

This year Ash Wednesday has a lot of competition. One is the Winter Olympics and the other is, of course, Valentine's Day. In fact, a parishioner said to me, "You're out of luck this year," Archbishop! I don't think many people will pay attention to Ash Wednesday. The competition's just too stiff."

Well, it had occurred to me that sports fans might be glued to their TV's and sweethearts focused more on chocolates than ashes ...but then again, some things are just beyond our control. So why not take advantage of these two major cultural events and use them to shed a little light on Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent we begin today.

Beginning with the Winter Olympics... And may I say, welcome to the Church's late-winter Olympics. We call them, "the Season of Lent". And you ask, "How are Lent and the Olympics in any way similar?"

I'm not much of a sports fan but even I cannot miss the enormous drive and discipline of the Olympic athletes. They are relentless in working out, in practicing their sport, in making sure they eat the right things and avoid the wrong things, in avoiding certain vices such as using disqualifying drugs, and so forth. The comparison is far from perfect, but you get the idea.

And why do the Olympians do this? Obviously for a prize. Doesn't your I-phone buzz every time an American athlete wins a gold medal? And aren't most of us keeping count, hoping that our athletes will bring home the gold? Of course we are and we should be rooting for our athletes. But as followers of Jesus, we should also be borrowing a page out of their notebooks.

In Lent, we like the Olympic athletes, are called to undergo spiritual discipline. It is

a time to get in shape for the greatest contest of our lives – the contest between good and evil, the contest between living our faith or losing our faith, the contest between being a disciple of the Lord or not. And this competition is not just for the record books; it's for keeps. It has huge consequences for our lives now and for our lives in eternity. Therefore we should bring to this competition the same urgency, dedication, and enthusiasm as the Olympic athletes bring to their competition. And, like them, we need to get in shape, we need to discipline ourselves. We need to have a plan of action as we head into the forty days of Lent. That's why in Lent the Church commends to us the penitential practices of prayer, fasting, and generosity to the poor and vulnerable, with a particular emphasis on making use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is how we get in shape for the contest of contests. This is how we practice our faith. This is how we win the prize.

And the prize in question is much more valuable than a gold medal. The prize we seek to attain is the friendship of Christ in the company of his saints. So we are striving right now to remove from our lives everything that hinders us from practicing our faith and everything that hinders us from developing a robust friendship with Christ, so that when Holy Week and Easter arrives, our minds and hearts will be really open to celebrate his death and resurrection by which we pass from sin to grace and from death to life.

A word now about the convergence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. It hasn't happened since 1945, so we don't have a lot of experience with this! So let me make one brief comparison between the two.

Valentine's Day is one of the ways our culture celebrates romantic love. Restaurants, flower shops, candy stores, and jewelers are only too happy to help married couples and sweethearts express their love for one another. Not every expression of Valentine's Day is appropriate but I think we can all agree that for human beings intimate love is crucial. As St. John Paul II wrote many years ago, 'We cannot live without love. Without love are incomprehensible to ourselves.'

And so, aren't we surprised to find out that Lent is all about intimate love? Didn't the Prophet Joel tell us 'to rend our hearts not our garments?' In Lent we are seeking to remove from our hearts anything that gets in the way of God's immense and tender

love for us. We seek to be purified and deepened in our relationship of love with the Lord, with one another in the Church, and with people everywhere. We seek that pure heart and steadfast spirit without which authentic love of any sort simply isn't possible. That is why we stand before the Lord today in our abject nothingness. As we receive ashes, we ask him to strip away from us every false god.

So ashes might not hold a candle to chocolates or champagne but I'll wager that most every couple would prefer the gift of pure love over all the gifts that money can buy. It's the same way with our relationship of love with the Lord. What he wants most from us is this: a pure heart and a steadfast spirit. A heart is willing to sacrifice its pleasures and to love others tenderly. Thus Lent is a celebration of that love above every other love.

So let me leave you with this. May the Holy Spirit grant us strength to be real Lenten Olympians! And may the Spirit pour into our hearts anew the love of Christ so that when Holy Week and Easter arrive we will know the joy of victory and the joy of love as never before!

May God bless us and keep us in his love!