

Do Ashes Make a Difference?

The Catholic Review

As is usually the case, churches across the Archdiocese were especially well attended this Ash Wednesday, a helpful sign that some Catholics whom we do not see at Mass too often are still aware of their faith. Please God, the Lord used the opportunity to draw them more closely into His life and love.

In the early Church, Lent was a time of repentance for public sinners - murderers and adulterers, for example. Duration of the length of Lent varied from time to place, but the penitent was excluded from the Mass and in sack cloth and ashes would stand at the church asking the faithful for prayers and forgiveness.

As I understand it, so joyful and ecstatic were they on Holy Thursday when they were received back into the church and allowed to participate in the Mass and the Eucharist, that in time the rest of the faithful - sinners all - realized that they wanted to experience that joy of conversion and that renewed excitement in approaching the Eucharist. So Lent became a period of repentance for the whole Church.

"Remember, you are dust and unto dust you shall return."

Sobering words, indeed, and a reminder that what distinguishes us from all other creatures of the earth is the breath of God which quickened us at the moment of procreation. (Animals are "reproduced." Humans are "procreated.") We are made to the image of God from conception and that image is strengthened immensely when we are "Christ-ened" at Baptism. From the very beginning and throughout our lives, hard-wired for God as we are, we intuitively seek a greater share of God. In fact, our insatiable yearning for love and beauty will never be fully realized except in God.

Original sin tends to divert that search for God, causing us to think full joy and perfection can be found in created things - only to disappoint us. Instead of placing God at the center of our lives, we become self-centered, self-absorbed, self-satisfied, self-seeking. The graces of Lent are meant to help us reignite and bring back to life

our hunger for God in Christ.

It is Christ who invites us on our journey of Lent, Christ who accompanies us and Christ who awaits us in Resurrection. He does all this through the Eucharist – especially daily Mass – through the Sacrament of Penance, through works of charity consciously undertaken in His name and for His sake, and the discipline of our bodies as a means of identifying with His suffering and death.

A simple practice I have suggested is to read over and ponder for 15 minutes the daily Mass readings for that day. These are guide posts along the 40-day journey, and a prayer for the Holy Spirit's guidance on each occasion might well make a difference in your life: What is it I desire most in life and where does the Lord fit into those desires?

"Remember, you are dust..." Those ashes smeared on millions of foreheads last Wednesday will mean nothing unless we are resolved somehow to make that 40-day Journey with Christ.

Hopefully some of the above suggestions will help make a difference.