

To Rise Again from Ashes

I guess most of us can remember going to church on Ash Wednesday to receive ashes – made from the burnt palms from last year’s Palm Sunday – since we were little children. I couldn’t wait to get to school with the big smudge on my forehead, to show everyone: “I was Catholic”! There is something about ashes that speaks to us. I can remember once, when I was a young priest, giving ashes to a parishioner who was in the hospital and the nurses came up – waiting in line – to get the ashes! ...and even a Jewish doctor, who was doing minor foot surgery on someone, came out of the operating room to get ashes! (True story!)

This practice goes back to the early church, when sinners would cover themselves with ashes as the sign of their desire to repent, to change and they would then stand in the village square for their penance.

Some might say: might not there not be a more meaningful symbol for us 21st century Catholics to remind us of our need to repent, ...to change, ...to let go of what brings us – and others – pain or brokenness; and then to towards healing and conversion, which the 40 days of Lent are all about?

I’m not so sure....

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Sisters and brothers, the reality is that we live on and among some monstrous ash heaps:

- ❖ countless wars have reduced millions of human beings to ashes,
- ❖ violence and crime and unjust economic policies have made many of our cities ash heaps,
- ❖ too many people in our global village, our nation and our city live amid the ashes of poverty, disease, abuse and enslavement,
- ❖ much of the air we breathe and water we drink on our Mother Earth are full of the ashes of pollutants,
- ❖ sometimes our own selfishness, anger, arrogance, stubbornness and overgrown egos leave too many of our relationships in the ashes of estrangement and division: the ashes that we reduce others to as a result of our need to control, our self-absorption, our impatience, our resentment.

Who then could say that ‘ashes’ are no longer a symbol that speaks to the sophisticated 21st century folks like us...?

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Brothers and sisters, these ashes that will be crossed on our foreheads today, symbolize the worst of the sins of humanity that move us to fear for our future. These ashes, that will be crossed on our foreheads today, symbolize the need for each of us to turn away from the things in our lives that hurt us and hurt others.

These ashes *also* symbolize our desire – as disciples of Jesus – for conversion, for change; our commitment, as we begin this 40 day Lenten retreat, to transform the ash-heaps of destruction into lights of hope and fires of compassion.

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Sisters and brothers, there is hope beyond these ashes, hope that we can find our way out of the desert of cynicism, darkness, blindness, brokenness...; that we can mend the hearts we have broken - including our own; that we can bridge the chasms that divide us from one another.

In the clear light of Christ this Ash Wednesday, let us look honestly at ourselves, recognize the need to change, the need to heal the relationships we have hurt and commit ourselves anew to create the world as God intended.

Our 40 day spring cleaning of our hearts is an opportunity, an invitation, a call from Jesus to rise from our ashes to Easter hope, mercy, compassion and justice!

Before we bless these ashes, that will be our sign today, let us take a couple of moments to call to mind what these ashes might symbolize in our own lives as we begin our spring cleaning of our hearts. Amen.

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