

Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology

Ash Wednesday Day of Recollection

February 17, 2021

Ash Wednesday and Lent and Lent in the time of pandemic

In the Gospel for today (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18), Jesus tells his followers not to show off their fasting and to pray in the inner rooms of their homes. These words take on new meaning this year - unable to be marked by ashes, restricted to our homes, our prayers are private but no less fervent. This year we mark our hearts and not our heads. May the loss of traditional Ash Wednesday observance be the first thing we let go in deepening our Lenten journey. Remember the call to return to God.

In the first reading from the prophet Joel – (*Joel 2:12-13*) we will hear these words: “Even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God.”

As we begin this graced season of Lent on this Ash Wednesday, God asks for our whole hearts, with our grief, our sacrifice, and our sorrow.

I invite you to pause for a moment, close your eyes and breathe deeply.

- Visualize yourself. How do you come before the God this year on Ash Wednesday? Take that posture that most represents your inner spirit.
- In the inner room of your heart, ask yourself what limits do you put on God's love of you?
- What is standing between you and the God who knows and loves you?
- How will you use this Lent to remove your limitations on God's love? How will you use this Lent to move closer to God who made, loves and cares for you?

As we begin our walk with Jesus to the cross and resurrection, we unite our mortality and limits to Christ's own suffering and passion in order that we might enjoy his divine life as well. To mark the beginning of your journey this Lent, trace a cross on your forehead and repeat the words of our ritual of Ash Wednesday, "*You are dust and to dust you shall return*".

Today is a day of prayer and fasting, and marks for us the beginning of Lent. I often marvel at how many people are drawn to services on Ash Wednesday. After all, it's not a holy day of obligation and it falls in the middle of the week. I once discussed this with my old pastor back in Buffalo, NY who noted how everyone who showed up on Ash Wednesday, left with something, no matter their status in or outside the Church.

Leaving with a smudge of ashes on the forehead holds deep meaning for many, many people.

For me, the central meaning of the traditions and practices of Ash Wednesday and Lent have to do with our humanness, our mortality, our weakness, and our fallen-ness.

Remember, “*You are dust and to dust you shall return*”. This quotation from Genesis 3:19, a verse where God tells Adam the bad news of what his sin had brought about. Although, Adam once enjoyed the reality of a deathless life in God’s perfect creation, now his body would die. In time, he would return to the dust from which he was made.

This was bad news for Adam. And it is bad news for us. Like Adam, we have come from dust, and to dust we will return. Throughout our lives, our dusty bodies remind us of our mortality, when they get sick, or when they work imperfectly, or when they age, or when they stop working altogether.

Of course many good things come from our bodies, including new human life, fulfilling work, loving embraces, acts of charity and kindness.

So Ash Wednesday begins with bad news. It invites us into a time of extended contemplation, reflection and contrition, as we consider during Lent just how much we need One to save us from our sin.

But Ash Wednesday also signifies hope. The ashes that are this

year sprinkled on our heads symbolize our mortality and sin but also alludes to that which will set us free. It reminds us that God has entered into our human condition in order to break the power of sin and welcome us into the fullness of his life.

Recently, I read an article in the St. Anthony Messenger entitled “Dust to Dust: A Reflection on Ash Wednesday”. The author, Mary Ann Steutermann, writes that Ash Wednesday and Lent tend to get a bad rap. At first look, the beginning of Lent each year doesn’t seem to have a very uplifting message. When we receive the ashes, we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. But “returning to dust” doesn’t sound all that positive, does it? Death isn’t something we like to think about, much less celebrate, in our liturgy and prayer unless, of course at funeral or memorial mass.

However, if we take a closer look, we find that the message of Ash Wednesday has far more to do with life than with death. It’s much more about what it means to be human—on this side of death’s door, not only beyond. Being human means being both **blessed and broken**, and this day—the beginning of Lent is a special invitation to look at our own brokenness in a way that can bring healing, strength, and courage.

Of course, brokenness is never the goal, even if we can encounter God through the process. We don’t set out to come up short, make mistakes, or feel “less than.” Fr. Leo John Dehon, founder of the SCJs said many years ago on Ash Wednesday, *“I am but nothingness; however, I will go to God and I will go with humility. I will go with the awareness of my weakness, but confident anyway, because God is good, because the Son*

of God took on a heart to love me, and he broke this heart to let flow on my soul the fragrance of his mercy.”

The reality is we often do feel “less than” or that we are nothing, a reality that is one mysterious thread within the complex tapestry of human life. We have another word for this kind of brokenness, one that captures our essence as incomplete all on our own. That word is **vulnerable**.

A simple online search of the word turns up countless videos, articles, and book titles. But what does it really mean?

To be vulnerable is to be **exposed**, to be **open**. Being vulnerable means that the parts of ourselves that are not strong and beautiful are visible to others. Vulnerability is *“having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome.”*

Have you ever tried something new without being sure it would turn out OK? Then you have been vulnerable because you allowed failure to be a real possibility. Have you ever forgiven someone who betrayed you? Then you have been vulnerable because you opened yourself to being hurt again.

Have you ever asked for help? You have been vulnerable because you risked having your weaknesses exposed. Have you ever loved another person? You have been vulnerable because you took a chance on the other person not returning that love.

Life affords us many opportunities to choose to accept vulnerability. We can choose to share our feelings in a relationship without knowing how the other person will respond. We can choose to take a chance on a new career path (like leaving all behind to follow Jesus and pursue ordained ministry),

knowing that we may not succeed. But we aren't always able to choose the kinds of vulnerability we experience. Life also forces us into brokenness entirely against our will.

Jesus had a lot to say about this kind of vulnerability. In fact, the beatitudes are the blueprint he laid out to help us honor our broken parts as a means of growth and transformation. He taught that being vulnerable—in other words, being poor or meek, feeling sorrowful or persecuted—is an opportunity to encounter the divine.

Suffering has a way of stripping us of our ego and false notions of self-sufficiency, which makes room for an experience of the divine. In accepting our faults, challenges, and pain, we create a space for God's grace to work its mysterious magic in our lives. Being vulnerable is the door through which we must travel to become the best, most authentic versions of ourselves.

Pope Francis, in his Ash Wednesday homily a few years ago, has said of Lent, that it is: *“the invitation to “Pause” in order to look and contemplate, to “See” the real face of Jesus and to “Return” without fear, to experience the healing and reconciling tenderness of God.”*

Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable is how we accept our brokenness. The dust of Ash Wednesday is a powerful reminder of the vulnerability that is part of our spiritual DNA as human beings.

Too often, we approach Ash Wednesday with liturgical gloom and doom. It's the “black sheep” of the family of dark solemnities in the liturgical calendar, failing even to garner status as a holy day of obligation. But when painted in this light,

it's easy to miss its beautiful invitation to claim our brokenness, embrace our vulnerability, and stand in solidarity with all those who do the same.

God is ready to heal our woundedness, to make us more whole than ever before.

This is the time for introspection, and even penance, as we look forward with humble awe and deep gratitude to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection.

Our Lenten Invitation is

Rend your hearts, not your garments...

Fr. Byron Haaland, SCJ (our province Novice Master) recently wrote in his reflection for Ash Wednesday that, *“Lent is a time when we are challenged to recognize our superficialities (our vulnerabilities), our fears of taking the journey deeper into our own deserts to reach nearer our hearts. We take note that Jesus calls us away from the superficial garments that adorn our surface realities. We hear the invitation to rend our hearts. The call is to follow Jesus into the depths. We recognize our fears and lazy willingness to remain on the surface of life.*

As we begin this journey on Ash Wednesday, we encounter the love and mercy of a gentle God who offers us courageous hearts to begin the journey. Faced with such grace we can't help but respond to that love by asking

forgiveness. As we rend our hearts, we begin to welcome the Spirit into our lives. We recognize and respond to Jesus by following him as he seeks the Father's will. There is a temptation to take credit for this adventure, but grace reminds us that we are following the Lord deeper into the desert, to our hearts.

It is God who is at work in our hearts."

Prayer

God, you chose to limit yourself for the sake of your people. Let me walk you this Lent as I face my own limitations and seek to be your presence in the world. Create in me a clean heart that I might know, love, and serve you better through my service of others. Amen.

So, let us begin this walk with Jesus...

Let us begin this amazing Lenten Journey...