

Ash Wednesday + 5 March 2025

As we celebrate Ash Wednesday today, we might consider a basic question: why do we start Lent with ashes? Well, ashes had an important symbolic value in the Old Testament. Ashes were associated with purification for a person who was ritually unclean (cf Num 19). Ashes were associated with grief and sorrow, especially at a great personal loss (cf 2 Sam 13). Finally, ashes were associated with repentance, signifying a person's public display of deep *humility*—a word that literally means “of the earth”, of dust, of ashes (cf Job 42). The book of Genesis says that man was made out of the “dust” of the earth. Now that's not literal, but more of an in image: we are made of the elements of the earth: we are created beings; we are not God.

All of this is in the background of today's observance of Ash Wednesday. Each year, we take this day to come to terms with the reality that we too are an unclean people: we are sinners. Hopefully, this realization of our sinfulness leads to a righteous sorrow—sorrow for having not loved God as we should. But sorrow shouldn't stop there: it should lead to repentance and a desire to change, to make things right in our lives, which opens the door to salvation. The ashes we place on our foreheads are merely an outward sign of a far more profound interior movement toward conversion.

Now for most of us have been celebrating Ash Wednesday for many years, and it may seem rather routine, ho-hum. Which is why in the Catholic media world you see all sorts of offerings out there claiming to help us have “best Lent ever!” And certainly as a parish we try to come up with ideas to keep Lent fresh each year. But part of the wisdom behind the “routine” of Ash Wednesday and Lent is realizing that growth in holiness is not a one and done thing. It takes constant, daily effort. Yes, we may have certain powerful experiences along the way that give us a major boost, but our relationship with God is like any relationship in that it takes constant effort.

Now, it is also true that God is the one who makes us holy: we do not earn heaven nor sanctify ourselves. But that doesn't mean that we are merely spectators in God's work. We might think of growth in holiness as a dance: God invites, He leads, and we follow. It's not always easy, especially at first, but in time, with practice, it becomes almost 2nd nature—and we enjoy it more and more. In fact, 2nd nature is a really good way to describe it: our penances are ways to get rid of the old, fallen human nature, and to embrace our “new nature”: new life in Christ. This is a process that will take the rest of our lives, but that's ok, because it is the most important project of our lives. And Lent gives us an opportunity to begin it once again, knowing that the Lord is with us, in us. And if we allow Him to do so, He will make of us something new, more like Him, and someday ready for heaven.