

Ash Wednesday 2020 SML  
MT 6:1-6,16-18

The most basic Catholic gesture in prayer is and always will be the sign of the Cross. The sign of the Cross is a way of confessing Christ crucified with your very own body. In the words of St. Paul:

I know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.  
(1COR 2:2)

Blessing yourself with the sign of the Cross is a visible and public “Yes” to Our Blessed Lord:

- ✓ who suffered for you, and, who, in His Body, made God’s love visible, even to the end;
- ✓ who reigns not by destruction, but by the humility of suffering and love, which is stronger than all the power of the world and wiser than all the calculating intelligence of men.

By blessing yourself with the sign of the Cross, you place yourselves under the protection of the Cross, hold it in front of you like a shield that will guard you in all the distress of daily life and give you the courage to go on.

In the words of Our Blessed Lord:

If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. (MK 8:34)

When we bless ourselves with the Sign of the Cross, you connect the sign of the Cross with the confession of faith in the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this way, the sign of the Cross becomes a remembrance of Baptism, which is particularly clear when we blessed ourselves with holy water as we passed the doors of the Church. The sign of the Cross, together with the invocation of the Blessed Trinity, sums up all of Catholicism. It displays what is distinctively Catholic.

But on Ash Wednesday, when you are blessed with the sign of the Cross made of ashes, you enter into a rather deliberate examination of conscience. What happens after you leave the Church with those ashes on your forehead? The first thing that happens is that you go out into the world where others will see that cross on your forehead. Although reactions may vary, you would want to make sure your lifestyle reflects the “distinctively Catholic” silent witness your ashes are giving. Is your silent witness authentic, or in light of this morning’s (evening’s) gospel, hypocritical?

The other thing that will happen is you will eventually go home and wash those dirty ashes off your forehead, once and for all. And doesn't that water also become a concrete, tactile

reminder of your Catholic baptism, when promises were made and renewed at Confirmation, that you would:

- ✓ practice the Catholic faith,
- ✓ keep God's commandments,
- ✓ love God and neighbor, and
- ✓ reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises.

So again, the question arises, is your silent witness authentic, or in light of this morning's (evening's) gospel, hypocritical? If you feel authentic, you are off to a good start this Lent. But if you feel hypocritical, you are also off to a good start as this Lent can be a timely one, to move from hypocrisy to authenticity.

So tonight, after Mass, Father Roy and I will be hearing confessions, quick and easy confessions. It will be simple, but it will be confession. Father Roy will stand in one corner and I will stand in the other. No "Bless me Father for I have sinned . . . . " So if you're from the old school and insist on starting with the formula, tonight is not the night for you to go to confession.

You will say two words. "Six months." "Four years." Three words will be too many Six weeks ago will be one word too many. Then you will confess your sins. One word for each sin. Lying. Cheating, Adultery. Impurity. Impatience. One word for

each sin. Two words for each sin will be too many. Father Roy and I will be giving the same penance: 5 Hail Marys. 6 Hail Marys will be too many.

Now we will say the Act of Contrition. You may follow along if you like, but if you don't know it. Just listen, and at the end say three words, "Me too Lord." Four words will be too many.

And then you will receive absolution: Christ forgiving you through the words and actions of the priest. Father Roy and I will do all the talking.

Authentic or once hypocritical, this Lent you will be making a great start.