

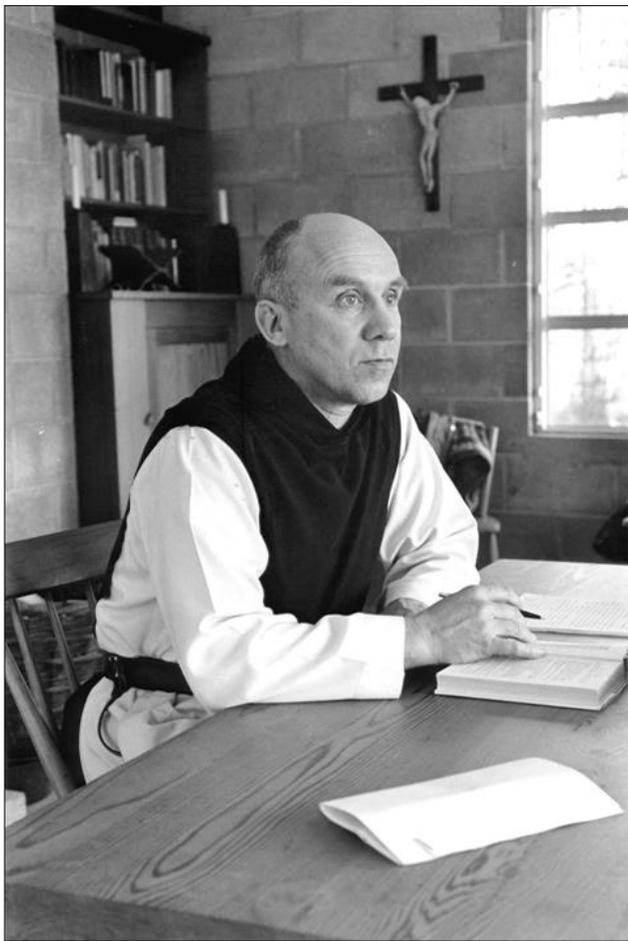
Ash Wednesday

by Fr. Thomas Merton, OCSO

Even the darkest moments of the liturgy are filled with joy and Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten fast, is a day of happiness, the Christian feast. It cannot be otherwise, as it forms part of the great Easter cycle.

The Paschal Mystery is above all the mystery of life in which the Church, by celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ, enters into the Kingdom of Life which He has established once and for all by His definitive victory over sin and death. We must remember the original meaning of Lent as the *ver sacrum*, the church's "holy spring" in which the catechumens were prepared for their baptism, and public penitents were made ready by penance for their restoration to the sacramental life in a communion with the rest of the Church.

Lent is, then, not a season of punishment so much as one of healing. There is joy in the salutary fasting and abstinence of the Christian who eats and drinks less in order that his mind may be more clear and receptive to receive the sacred nourishment of God's word, which the whole Church announces and meditates



upon in each day's liturgy throughout Lent. The whole life and teaching of Christ pass before us, and Lent is a season of special reflection and prayer, a forty-day retreat in which each Christian, to the extent that he is able, tries to follow Christ into the desert by prayer and fasting.

Some, monks and ascetics, will give themselves especially to fasting and vigils, silence and solitude in these days, and they will meditate more deeply on the word of God. But all the faithful should listen to the word as it is announced in the liturgy or in Bible services and respond to it according to their ability. In this way, for the whole church, Lent will not be merely a season simply of a few formalized penitential practices, half understood and undertaken without interest, the time of *metanoia*, the turning of all minds and hearts to God in preparation for the celebration of the Paschal Mystery in which some will for the first time receive the light of Christ, others will be restored to the communion of the faithful, and all will renew their baptismal consecration of their lives to God, in Christ.

The cross of ashes, traced upon the forehead of each Christian, is not only a reminder of death but inevitably (though tacitly) a pledge of resurrection. The ashes of the Christian are no longer mere ashes. The body of the Christian is a temple of the Holy Ghost, and though it is fated to see death, it will return again to life in glory. The cross, with which the ashes are traced upon us, is the sign of Christ's victory over death. The words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" are not to be taken as the quasi-form of a kind of "sacrament of death" (as if such

a thing were possible). It might be good stoicism to receive a mere reminder of our condemnation to die, but is not Christianity. The declaration that the body must fall temporarily into dust is a challenge to spiritual combat, that our burial may be "in Christ" and that we may rise with Him to "live unto God."

The ashes of this Wednesday are not merely a sign of death, but a promise of life to those who do penance. And yet the ashes are clearly a summons to penance, fasting and compunction.

Hence the seemingly paradoxical character of the Ash Wednesday liturgy. The Gospel charges us to avoid outward signs of grief and, when we fast, to anoint our heads and to wash our faces. Yet we receive a smear of ashes on our heads. There must be grief in this day of joy. It is a day, we shall see, in which joy and grief go together hand in hand: for that is the meaning of compunction – a sorrow which pierces, which liberates, which gives hope and therefore joy. Compunction is a baptism of sorrow, in which the tears of the penitent are psychological but also deeply religious purification, preparing a disposing him for the sacramental

waters of baptism or for the sacrament of penance. Such sorrow brings joy because it is at once a mature acknowledgement of guilt and the acceptance of its full consequences: hence it implies a religious and moral adjustment to reality, the acceptance of one's actual condition, and the acceptance of reality is always a liberation from the burden of illusion which we strive to justify by our errors in our sins. Compunction is a necessary sorrow, but it is followed by joy and relief because it wins for us one of the greatest blessings: the light of truth of the grace of humility. The tears of the Christian penitent are real tears, but they bring joy.

Only the inner rending, the tearing of the heart, brings this joy. It lets out our sins, and lets in the clean air of God's spring, the sunlight of the days that advance toward Easter. Rending of the garments lets in nothing but the cold. The rending of the heart which is spoken of in the lesson from Joel is that "tearing away" from ourselves and our *vestusas* – the "oldness" of the old man, wearied with the boredom and drudgery of an indifferent existence, it we may turn to God and taste His mercy, and the liberty of His sons.

When we turn to Him, what do we find? That "He is gracious and merciful, patient and rich of mercy." He even speaks to us in his own words, saying: "Behold I will send you corn and wine and oil and you shall be filled with them: and I will know more make you a reproach among the nations." This at the beginning of a 40 days' fast!

It is necessary that at the beginning of this fast the Lord should show Himself to us in His mercy. The purpose of Lent is not only expiation, to satisfy the divine justice, but above all a preparation to rejoice in His love. And this preparation consists in receiving the gift of His mercy – a gift which we receive insofar as we open our hearts to it, passing out what cannot remain in the same room with mercy.

Now one of the things we must cast out first of all is fear. Fear narrows the little entrance of our heart. It shrinks up our capacity to love. It freezes up our power to give ourselves. If we were terrified of God as an inexorable judge, we would not confidently await His mercy, or approach Him trustfully in prayer. Our peace, our joy in Lent are a guarantee of grace.

In laying upon us the light cross of ashes, the Church desires to take off our shoulders all other heavy burdens – the crushing load of worry and obsessive guilt, the dead weight of our own self-love. We should not take upon ourselves a "burden" of penance and stagger into Lent as if we were Atlas, carrying the whole world on his shoulders.

Perhaps there is a small likelihood of our doing so. But in any case, penance is conceived by the Church less as a burden than as a liberation. It is only a burden to those who take it up unwillingly. Love makes it light and happy. And that is another reason why Ash Wednesday is filled with the lightness of love.

To say there is joy in Ash Wednesday is not to empty the procession of its sorrows and anguish. "Save me, O God," we cry the very beginning, "for the waters have come up to my neck" (*RSV translation*). This is not a song of joy. If we present ourselves before God to receive ashes from the hand of the priest it is because we are convinced of our sinfulness.

Nevertheless, the liturgy of Ash Wednesday is not focused on the sinfulness of the penitents but on the mercy of God. The question of sinfulness is raised precisely because this is a day of mercy.

Nowhere will we find more tender expressions of the divine mercy than on this day. His mercy is kind. He looks upon us "according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies." In the introit we sing: "You are merciful to all (*Misereris omnium*), O Lord, and despise nothing that You have made. You overlook people's sins, to bring them to repentance, and You spare them, for You are the Lord our God" (*current Roman Missal*).

How good are these words of Wisdom in a time when on all sides the Lord is thought by men to be a God who hates. Those who deny Him say they do so because evil in the world could be the work only of a God that hated the world.

But even those who profess to love Him regard Him too often as a furious Father, who seeks only to punish and to revenge Himself for the evil that is done "against Him" – One who cannot abide the slightest contradiction but will immediately mark it down for retribution, and will not let a farthing of the debt go unpaid.

This is not the God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself "hides" our sins (*dissimulans peccata*) and gets them out of sight, like a mother making quick and efficient repairs on the soiled face of the child just before entering a house where he ought to appear clean. The blessings of the ashes know Him only as the "God who desires not the death of the sinner," "who is moved by humiliation and appeased by satisfaction." He is everywhere shown to us as "abundant in mercy" – *multum misericors*.

And from the infinite treasure of His mercies He draws forth a gift of compunction. This is a sorrow without servile fear, which is all the more deep and tender as it receives pardon from the tranquil, calm love of the merciful Lord: a love which the Latin liturgy calls, and to untranslatable words, *serenissima pietas*. The God of Ash Wednesday is like a calm sea of mercy. In him there is no anger.

The “hiding” of God’s severity is not a subterfuge. It is a revelation of His true nature. He’s not severe, and it is not theologically accurate to say that He becomes angry, that He is moved to hurt and to punish.

He is love. Love becomes severe only to those who make Him severe for themselves. Love is hard only to those who refuse Him. It is not, and cannot be, Love’s will to be refused. Therefore it is not and cannot be Love’s will to be severe and to punish.

But it is of the very nature of Love that His absence is sorrow and death and punishment. His severity flows not from His own nature but from the fact of our refusal. Those who refuse Him are severe to themselves, and immolate themselves to the bloodthirsty god of their own self-love.

It is from this idol that Love would deliver us. To such bitter servitude, Love would never condemn us.

This brings us to the meaning of the Lenten fast. It is not that food is evil, or that natural satisfactions are something God grudgingly allows us, preferring to deprive us of them when He can.

Fasting is a good thing because food itself as a good thing. But the good things of this world have this about them, that they are good in their season and not out of it. Food is good, but to be constantly eating is a bad thing and in fact is not even pleasant. The man who gorges himself with food and drink enjoys his surfeiting much less than the fasting person enjoys his frugal collation.

Even the fast itself, in moderation and according to God’s will, is a pleasant thing. There are healthy natural joys in self-restraint: joys of the spirit which shares its lightness even with the flesh. Happy is the man whose flesh does not burden his spirit but rests only lightly upon its arm, like a graceful companion.

That is why there is wisdom in fasting. The clear head and the light step of the one who is not overfed enable him to see his way into travel through life with a wiser joy. There’s even a profound natural rightness in this fast at the spring of the year.

These reasons are true as far as they go, but they are not in themselves a sufficient explanation of the Lenten fast. Fasting is not merely a natural and ethical discipline for the Christian. It is true that Saint Paul evokes the classic comparison of the athlete in training, but the purpose of the Christian fast is not simply to tone up the system, to take off useless fat, and get the body as well as the soul in trim for Easter. The religious meaning of the Lenten fast is deeper than that. Our fasting is to be seen in the context of life and death, and Saint Paul made clear that he brought his body into its subjection not merely for the good of the soul, but that the whole man might not be “cast away.” In other words the Christian fast is something essentially different from a philosophical and ethical discipline for the good of the mind. It has a part in the work of salvation, and therefore in the Paschal mystery. The Christian must deny himself, whether by fasting or in some other way, in order to make clear his participation, and therefore in the Paschal mystery. The mystery of our burial with Christ in order to rise with Him to a new life. This cannot be merely a matter of “interior acts” and “good intentions.” It is not supposed to be something purely “mental” and subjective. That is why fasting is proposed to the Christian by long tradition and by the Bible itself as a concrete way of expressing one’s self-denial in imitation of Christ in participation with His mysteries.

It is true that the present discipline of the Church, for serious reasons, has alleviated the obligation of fasting and in some areas has done away with it altogether. But certainly the Christian should desire, if he is able, to participate in this ancient Lenten observance which is so necessary for a genuine understanding of the meaning of the Paschal Mystery.

Finally, the ashes themselves are spiritual medicine, like all the sacramentals. The fruits of these apparently sterile ashes are wonderfully rich! Great is the secret power imparted to them by the influence of the risen body of Christ, who by His victory has become “life-giving Spirit.”

The riches of this sacramental are clear from the prayers of the blessing. Blessed and sanctified by the signed the cross, the ashes become a *remedium salubre*, a health-giving medicine, and they bring *sanitas* (wholeness, cleanness) to the body as well as protection to the soul, both of those availing for the remission of sins. They bring the grace of that humility which they signify, they bring also the pardon which we implore by the fact of receiving them.

They bring at the same time a realization of the horror of sin, and confidence of forgiveness. They bring with them all the aids necessary for the holy war of Lent, and they impart a special efficacy to our Lenten penances and prayers.

In a word, the ashes sign our whole being with the merciful blessing of God.

Excerpted from Merton’s book “Seasons of Celebration”

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*For more information about Father Thomas Merton or
to support the monks at the Abbey please visit their web page at WWW.MONKS.ORG.*

**REFLECTING ON THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS:
A PRAYER FOR THE SEASON OF LENT
by Fr. Thomas Merton, OCSO**

*Justify my soul, O God, but also from Your fountains fill my will with fire.
Shine in my mind, although perhaps this means "be darkness to my experience,"
but occupy my heart with Your tremendous Life.*

*Let my eyes see nothing in the world but Your glory,
and let my hands touch nothing that is not for Your service.*

Let my tongue taste no bread that does not strengthen me to praise Your great mercy.

*I will hear Your voice and I will hear all harmonies
You have created, singing Your hymns.*

*Sheep's wool and cotton from the field shall warm me enough
that I may live in Your service; I will give the rest to Your poor.*

Let me use all things for one sole reason: to find my joy in giving You glory.

Therefore keep me, above all things, from sin.

Keep me from the death of deadly sin which puts hell in my soul.

Keep me from the murder of lust that blinds and poisons my heart.

Keep me from the sins that eat a man's flesh with irresistible fire until he is devoured.

*Keep me from loving money in which is hatred,
from avarice and ambition that suffocate my life.*

*Keep me from the dead works of vanity and the thankless labor in which
artists destroy themselves for pride and money and reputation,
and saints are smothered under the avalanche of their own importunate zeal.*

*Stanch in me the rank wound of covetousness and the hungers
that exhaust my nature with their bleeding.*

Stamp out the serpent envy that stings love with poison and kills all joy.

Untie my hands and deliver my heart from sloth.

*Set me free from the laziness that goes about disguised as activity when
activity is not required of me, and from the cowardice
that does what is not demanded, in order to escape sacrifice.*

But give me the strength that waits upon You in silence and peace.

*Give me humility in which alone is rest,
and deliver me from pride which is the heaviest of burdens.
And possess my whole heart and soul with the simplicity of love.*

*Occupy my whole life with the one thought and the one desire of love,
that I may love not for the sake of merit, not for the sake of perfection,
not for the sake of virtue, not for the sake of sanctity, but for You alone.*

For there is only one thing that can satisfy love and reward it, and that is You alone.

[Excerpted from Merton's book *New Seeds of Contemplation*]