

Ash Wednesday 2021

In 1973, the legendary American actress Elizabeth Taylor appeared in a motion picture in which she played the part of a woman going through a mid-life crisis. Fearing that she is losing the affections of her husband, she decides to undergo cosmetic surgery from head to foot. Her hope was to reverse the aging process. The results of the surgery were remarkable. Taylor's character was transformed into a ravishing beauty. But there was a lesson still to be learned. Surgery can disguise a person's age, but nature herself cannot be fooled. Growing old is inevitable and an unmistakable sign that a human life is beginning to slip away.

The title of the film is worth noting: "Ash Wednesday". Perhaps the filmmaker had in mind words that are so familiar to us from the liturgy of Ash Wednesday, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall one day return". We must never be absent minded and forget that our life is fading away.

We begin each Lent by receiving ashes on our foreheads--- a grim reminder that we are "dust". This is not a morbid thought but a dose of reality. So often we behave as if our lives will never end. We are mortal. "Ashes are a foretaste of the dust that will rattle one day on our coffin".(Knox)

It would be a mistake to think that this penitential season begins on a sour note. On the contrary, we, as Christians, begin a forty day journey, the goal of which is the Day of the Resurrection. We are on our way to the Lord.

In 1958, the Cistercian monk and prolific author, Thomas Merton wrote an essay on the meaning of Ash Wednesday. He insists that it is not about doom and gloom. He writes:

"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 a Christian are no mere ashes. The body of a Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and though it is fated to see death, it will return again to life in glory"

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

The Old Testament Psalmist tells us that God knows our fashioning and remembers that we are dust. Because he is merciful, he takes pity on our weakness.

Let us pray that we all seize the opportunity to make this Lenten season special.

Let us pray

Let us fast

Let us reach out to those in need, especially the poor

Amen.

