

March 6, 2019 12:10 p.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

Ash Wednesday 2019

It seems like no matter how late Lent begins (and as we know, this year, Lent begins about as late as it possibly can – which means Easter comes very late this year as well), we almost always feel like Ash Wednesday sneaks up on us as if to catch us by surprise. But, as I wrote in my Lenten Pastoral Letter to all the Faithful of our Diocese which I just issued, I think this year, we might all agree that these 40 days of prayer, penance and sacrifice are welcome and needed; and, we pray, that this Lent will be for all of us a time for spiritual renewal and healing.

There has been so much going on in our Church that has created confusion, and even scandal, in light of the most recent revelations of sexual abuse and impropriety over these last 8 months, with perhaps more still to come, which needs purification and conversion. In addition, the world seems particularly divided, with great tensions and factions, both in international relationships as well as – perhaps especially in – the deep political divisions and lack of civility in social discourse in our own country. Perhaps we all find ourselves at the point of thinking that everyone needs to take a long pause to reconsider our circumstances – a 40-day pause might be exactly what's needed.

The Church in her wisdom provides this Lenten season for us as a kind of annual “retreat” so that we can do exactly that – take a spiritual pause to consider, very basically, what the penitential action in which we will all participate very shortly so graphically does. We will each come forward to humbly present ourselves for blessed ashes to be placed on our foreheads in the form of the sign of the cross. That action provides for us two basic reality checks: 1) it reminds us all that we are mortal human beings. When you receive your blessed Ashes, you might hear this prayer: *“Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you will return”*. We hope and pray for a long and happy life in this world; but our destiny is to live forever, with the Hope that our eternity will be with God in Heaven. 2) And that brings us to the 2nd reality check that receiving these ashes does for us: we are reminded that we are mortal human beings who are sinners. But even though that is true for all of us, the celebration of Easter, which Lent primarily is preparing us to celebrate, reminds us that Jesus, through His suffering, death and Resurrection, has defeated the lasting power of sin and death – a Victory in which we share, thanks to our Baptism into Christ. So, though we are sinners, we are not condemned – as long as we (to quote the 2nd form of the prayer that might be

used when you receive your Ashes) *“Turn away from sin, and remain faithful to the Gospel”*.

All the Scripture Readings we have just heard have a sense of urgency to them. Today’s First Reading from the Prophet Joel used numerous declarative and imperative verbs: *“Even now, says the Lord, return to Me....Rend your hearts....Blow the trumpet...Gather the people....Assemble the elders...Perhaps the Lord your God will relent and show us mercy.”* Today’s Second Reading from the 2nd Letter to the Corinthians also was an urgent plea from St. Paul: *“I implore you on behalf of Christ---be reconciled to God....Now is the acceptable time---Now is the Day of Salvation!”*

Today, I hope we choose, not just to receive these Blessed Ashes, but also to fully enter into these 40 days of Lent, asking for God’s grace to help us make whatever changes in our lives that we need to make, while at the same time, praying for our Church to be purified and renewed by rooting out the evil sin of sexual abuse, lack of transparency or any other evil. Finally, we also pray for an end to divisions and sins that lead to violent or hateful interactions among people and nations.

The Lenten Resolutions that we make should reflect the steps that each of us realizes we need to take to turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel. What is keeping us from doing that? Where do we need to focus our attention?

What do we need to “give up” – what sacrifices will help us to turn from sinful practices in our lives?

What do we need to “take up – making time in our daily lives for additional prayer – spending time in reminding ourselves each day of who we are, Whose we are, and what our lives are all about.

In what ways do we need to “stand up” – to be proud of our faith in Jesus, and to not be in any way ashamed to put our Faith into practice in our daily lives, and following Jesus’ example of charity and concern for others by practicing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy each day.

Lent has come. These 40 days will fly by, just like all the other days of our lives. May they not *pass us by*; rather, may they be fruitful for all of us, for our Church and for our world. Now is the time. Be reconciled to God!

God bless you, now and always