

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is one of the most popular days on the Church's calendar. Mass attendance spikes, even though some people prefer a system of drive-through "ashes-to-go" or leave Mass early as soon as their forehead is smudged. In our culture of convenience some people want to pick up their ashes without investing much time in the business of repentance.

Still, what draws most of us to church today is honesty. We each have sinned. We each have tried to cover it up. Other people notice our sin better than we do. Repentance takes time. Sometimes it takes years before we can look back and see the truth about words we said, deeds we performed that now we regret. Today we can see more honestly what we could not admit in the past.

We can each admit our faults privately, but Ash Wednesday offers a compelling reason for gathering at church with others. We share things in common with other human beings: the grace of being alive and the failure of being perfect. Yes, we sin. But everyone messes up. Coming together comforts us with the realization that we are not alone.

The Book of Psalms includes seven regarded as the penitential psalms. The most famous of these is 51, from which we draw today's responsorial. It opens with a direct admission of guilt and an appeal to God for forgiveness: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your merciful love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash me completely from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." This psalm also prays for a pure heart and a steadfast spirit, so that sin will not return. It dwells on the remorse people feel in the sadness of sin, and prays "Restore in me the joy of your salvation." It even promises God that if that joy returns, "my mouth shall proclaim your praise." God will hear good things in return.

Psalms 51 is practical. You can pray it whenever you feel sorrow for sin. The entire psalm is in the first person singular, so it expresses personal repentance very well. However, on Ash Wednesday, each year when we sing it after the first reading, the lectionary gives us a refrain in the first person plural. We all sang this evening, "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned"—not "for I have sinned," but "for we have sinned." We come as a collective body of sinners to confess the imperfections we share as humans. We are all guilty of the sins of our culture, such as anger, violence, prejudice, selfishness, laziness, indulgence, separation, and hate. We confess together on Ash Wednesday that "we have sinned," and we wear ashes where everyone else can see them. We sin, but we are not alone. We all need God's mercy.

We receive God's mercy especially in the sacrament of reconciliation. The Vatican recently approved a new English translation of the words associated with confession. This Lent, when you come to confession, we'll provide a sample of the format and a collection of prayers you may use as the act of contrition during a confession. We all sin, but ultimately we each come before the judgment throne of God to ask for the joy of salvation. As we embark on Lent this year, let us do so with honesty and take time to acknowledge our faults both in society and as individuals as we pray, "Be merciful, O Lord."