

Homily based on the readings from March 5, 2025 (Joel 2.12-18; 2 Corinthians 5.20-6.2; Matthew 6.1-6, 16-18)

In a world that has become indifferent – and even hostile – to the public practice of religion, Ash Wednesday serves as one of the few remaining *visible* demonstrations of Christian piety. In schools, offices, and businesses across the country, ordinary individuals walk around all day with a vaguely cross-shaped smudge on their forehead. This practice not only provides a conspicuous reminder of the beginning of Lent, but it also affords believers a rare opportunity to spot each other in a crowd.

As we come forward to get our ashes, though, it is possible that some of us may feel slightly uneasy. It is only natural to wonder whether we are being too ostentatious in our Lenten observance. Remember Christ's directive from today's Gospel:

When you fast,
do not look gloomy like the hypocrites.

They neglect their appearance,
so that they may appear to others to be fasting.
Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.
But when you fast,
anoint your head and wash your face,
so that you may not appear to be fasting.

This passage is sometimes interpreted as demanding that we wipe off our ashes as soon as we get out of Mass. Although there is nothing *wrong* with doing that, it is not really what Jesus is telling us to do.

Think, for a moment, about what the ashes on our forehead actually represent. Do they constitute a sort of public performance, akin to “the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them”? More importantly, do we perceive the ashes as a sign of our own moral superiority? If so, then we are not only missing the point of Ash Wednesday, but of the entire Lenten season. The ashes are intended to serve as a reminder of our

frailty, our mortality, our dependence on God. There is absolutely no place in today's observance for *self*-righteousness.

On the other hand, we have to remember that these ashes actually serve as a subtle form of evangelization – to a world that *desperately* needs to be reminded of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Prior to the Gospel reading, we heard Saint Paul's admonition that we be "ambassadors for Christ." To put it plainly, no one can serve as an ambassador without publicly presenting his credentials. We cannot give witness to Christ if there is no visible evidence of our Christianity.

This situation calls for each us to search our consciences. On the one hand, we must do everything we can to avoid pride or pretentiousness. On the other hand, we need to consider whether we are afraid – even on a subconscious level – of publicly admitting to being Christian. If that is the case – if that is even a possibility – we should set aside a substantial amount of time this Lent to pray and reflect about how we choose to present ourselves to our friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

Although we must respect everyone's right to his own beliefs, we must also recognize that religion fundamentally is not – and cannot be – a private endeavor. We worship God as a community, as a society:

Blow the trumpet in Zion!

proclaim a fast,

call an assembly;

Gather the people,

notify the congregation.

Our Christian faith is not something to be hidden away, like an ancestral treasure stored in an underground vault. It must be lived out in the open, like a radiant sun for all to see. While we are commanded to keep our personal virtues – such as they are – secret, our faith in Jesus Christ must be a matter of public record.

You may have heard this question before: if being Christian were made a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us? We should all

take that as a personal challenge for the upcoming Lenten season. By the time Good Friday comes around, we need to make sure that anyone seeking to prosecute us would have an *abundance* of evidence: not just a tiny smudge on our forehead, but our *joyful* and *courageous* testimony to the saving power of Jesus Christ.