

Pastoral Letter
March 2009

REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DUST, AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN

My daughter, Rebecca, woke up on Shrove Tuesday and asked at breakfast, “Am I going to be able to get my forehead *‘ashed’* this Lent?” Startled, I looked at her and suddenly remembered that for the last few Ash Wednesdays, I had been commuting to the Cathedral in South Bend from Culver and had been unable to take the girls out of school to bring them to Ash Wednesday services. For the last couple of years, my husband’s schedule had been such that he too had not been able to get the girls to Ash Wednesday services. Touched, I asked Rebecca if it was important to her to receive the sign of the cross on her forehead. She replied that it was and that she would even give up TV and computer time on Wednesday evening to come to the service. And so she did, and on our return home, she thanked me for having brought her to the service.

Children can teach us so much about spiritual life. The fact that a ten year-old understands that being reminded of her mortality is an important spiritual discipline (even if she wouldn’t use those words) is remarkable. Her insistence on receiving the Imposition of the Ashes was a reminder not to take the ritual lightly myself. What is it about receiving a smudgy black cross-shaped mark on our forehead year after year that is so important? We are reminded of our mortality...of our dependence on God. Sometimes humans don’t want to be reminded of that, do they? Who really wants to understand that we are made of the dust of the earth and that in the end, it is to that dust that we shall return – and that our existence depends on the grace and love of God?

Paradoxically, our head can understand that the sign of the cross is a mark of freedom. We understand that the very transient nature of our presence in this physical realm sets us up for the ultimate freedom of eternal presence in the arms of God. Sometimes it’s hard, however, for our heart to get to that understanding. As a consequence, engaging in this simple, ritual act of humility seems mundane and out of place in a culture that embraces and encourages being in control.

I invite you during this holy season of Lent to look for those places in your life where your desire to be in control impedes your life in God. Is there some place within the recesses of your spiritual heart that you can begin to let go and let God gain control? Perhaps there are a few minutes each day that you can surrender yourself to Him in prayer. As you brandish the mark of the cross on your forehead, can you also carry it in your heart...a sign of the knowledge that we are mortal...that we need God...that we are humble enough to let Him be in charge?

Did you get your forehead *“ashed”* this Lent? Was it the beginning of your journey to freedom? I pray for you a good and Holy Lent.