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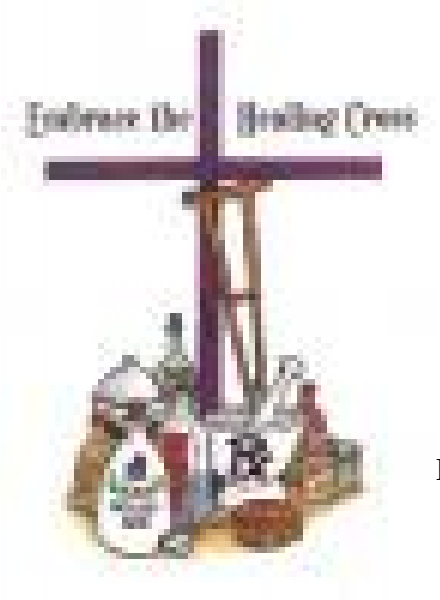
Ash Wednesday

Ed Hays | Feb. 24, 2009

For the ancients, ashes vividly symbolized what results when the life fire has departed from a body. This stark image of death was reflected in the ritual words used upon administering blessed ashes in ages past: Pulvis es, in pulverem reverteris ? ?Dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return.?



Lent itself was originally a penitential season of reconciliation with the church ? ashes and sackcloth being the visible signs of repentant sinners who were seeking public reunion with the church. Along with fasting, ashes were a sign of mourning and grief at times of death. In times of disaster, they served as physical offerings of supplication to God. Christian ascetics used to sprinkle ashes on their food to indicate their total disdain for the pleasures of the body. The ancient Mayans of Central America used ashes as an inoculation against disease, much like a flu shot. When planting corn, they mixed in ashes to protect their seeds from blight and rotting.

Now, you are not a sinner seeking public reconciliation and quite likely you are not planting corn or mourning the death of a loved one, so how can today?s ashes be good medicine for you?

You can start by letting today?s ashes vaccinate your seeds of reform against maggot ?tomorrowitis,? that procrastination fungus that postpones a reform of life until next year?s Lent or even until your deathbed. The pharmacist-healer Jesus says to all those suffering from lethargic encephalitis, the deadening inflammation of the brain that is so common in our culture: ?Stay awake. Seek healing this very day, for you do not know if you will be alive tomorrow. Now is the hour to awaken.?

Ashes are also an ageless remedy for sickly prayer. Abraham of old practiced this prayer remedy when he said, ?Let me take it upon myself to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes? (Genesis 18:27).

When daring to beg favors from God, the Undying Font of Mercy, Abraham laced his humble prayer with the

ashes of his own grave. Lying in the dust of one?s death rest is an antidote to the hubris and hyperactivity that mark our contemporary way of life. Praying from such a position of humility heals the soul with true justification ? just as it did for the tax collector praised by Jesus in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

The tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ?God, be merciful to me, a sinner!? -- Luke 18:13

Here is a good Ash Wednesday prescription: Slowly read aloud this parable of Jesus found in Luke 18:9-14 [1].

Because of infirmity, family obligations, or work-related responsibilities, you may not be able to go to church today and be marked with ashes. But do no let that prevent you from being touched by this powerful ancient medicine. All the earth is holy land and its soil is blessed. So, place a small pinch of dust or dirt in the palm of your hand and use it to trace upon yourself the sign of the cross, a sign of death that leads to new life, as you prayerfully ask God to heal you.

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