NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# Finding the meaning of Ash Wednesday in a darkened movie theater

Jamie Manson | Feb. 28, 2012 Grace on the Margins

I didn't set out on Ash Wednesday not wanting to participate in its rituals. To be perfectly honest, it wasn't until I was on a ferryboat ride to Manhattan and saw the foreheads of some of the passengers that I even realized it was Ash Wednesday.

How could I have forgotten? I was at a church event the previous weekend and was reminded of the day and time of the community's service.

It wasn't my memory lapse that disturbed me, but the realization that it was Ash Wednesday and I didn't seem to care. The lack of feeling was disorienting.

What brought me to this state of disaffection? I had fine memories of Ash Wednesdays past. Preparing distribution services when I was in Divinity School, bringing ashes to my housebound grandmother, leading services when I worked in the parish.

Ash Wednesday was a wild but holy day back when I was a pastoral associate. The high concentration of Catholics in the city demanded that we perform ash distribution services every half-hour. We would see at least 3,000 come through the church doors, most of them strangers.

Our greatest challenge was to only distribute ashes during the service. The pastor insisted that planting ashes on even one person outside of the liturgy could create a scene.

"It's like ants at a picnic," he warned.

He wasn't kidding. Minutes after I had concluded an afternoon service, two fully suited members of the New York Fire Department followed me across the sanctuary. They begged me for ashes, insisting that they had to get back to the firehouse in case there was a call. How could I argue with that?

No sooner had I smeared the first cross than an entire battalion spontaneously appeared behind them, followed by several Filipino ladies. It was strange realizing that so many were desperate for this sacramental stuff that I held in my hands.

And knowing that they were all happy to receive this sacred substance from me, a young, plainclothes woman in a sparsely populated church, was unexpectedly moving, too.

But this year I didn't want to touch or be touched by ashes.

I was coming down from five straight weeks of writing on contraception, arguing against bishops and fundamentalist Christians, listening to commentators and Catholic news outlets overlook, ignore or betray the rights of women.

I felt too burned out for ashes.

Maybe I was tired of being reminded of my sinfulness. The battle over women's health reminded us of how much the church still wants to shame women for being sexual beings and to block them from making decisions about their own bodies.

Heading out of the ferry terminal, I walked straight up Broadway for more than two miles. There was an opportunity on nearly every block to receive ashes. On the right side of the street stood the Shrine of Elizabeth Ann Seton, founder of the Sisters of Charity, a community of women religious whose work touches me deeply.

On the left side of the street was St. Paul's Chapel, still viewed as a shrine to the collapsed Twin Towers that stood in its backyard. Ashes take on a powerful symbolism there.

But I had no desire to cross the thresholds of any of these places.

Instead, I turned into a Chipotle for lunch. In a grand act of rebellion, I had a full meal. I even threw abstinence out the window and ate a chicken taco.

Why was I being so obstinate? Perhaps I was just weary of listening to church's commands?particularly the ones that insist I deprive myself. I already felt starved enough.

Over lunch I remembered a story I read in *The New York Times* when I was in Catholic high school. The article was about a Dominican priest named Matthew Fox who had just been kicked out of his order and excommunicated by a German cardinal named Joseph Ratzinger.

The *Times* writer noted with surprise that he was conducting the interview on a Friday during Lent, and Fox still insisted on not eating meat. I wondered if Fox was still keeping the tradition given all that we've learned about the hierarchy in last 20 years?

Whatever his reasons were back then, today I was refusing the church and its rituals. Maybe I was just tired of the church telling me to die to my old self, all the while watching the hierarchy refuse to die to some of its antiquated, harmful ways.

As I continued my journey up Broadway, more and more faces with black smudges of various shapes and sizes kept coming at me. Jesus didn't wear ashes, I rationalized. Where in the Gospel does it say to do this anyway?

After I walked past the umpteenth church on my route, I headed straight for a movie theater.

One of my favorite courses in college was called "The Catholic Novel." Of the 10 books we read, my favorite was Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*. In it, the novel's anti-hero, Binx Bolling, escapes reality through the fantasized versions of life projected on the silver screen. The book ends on Ash Wednesday with Binx undergoing a transformation: He immerses himself in real life by pursuing medical school and getting engaged.

On Ash Wednesday, Binx turned away from the artifice of the movies and entered more deeply into reality. I, on the other hand, opted to spend the day turning away from ashes and becoming a moviegoer.

That was, until the movies brought the ashes to me.

I bought a ticket to *The Descendants*, a film about a man named Matt King (played by George Clooney) who is facing the devastating decision of removing his comatose wife, Elizabeth, from life support.

The film's second-to-last scene shows King and his two daughters in a rowboat in the Pacific. One by one, they scoop Elizabeth's cremated remains into the sea, then Clooney pours the rest in.

We watch as the ashes form a small cloud in the water and then, within moments, are absorbed into the clear, blue tide.

"Well, I guess that's it," he says to his daughters. The phrase seems dismissive or defeated. Yet in it, I found meaning in ashes that had eluded me all day.

After all Matt King and his daughters had been through, living at Elizabeth's hospital bedside, facing sickness unto death, hoping against hope, accepting a tragic conclusion, this is all what it came down to. Given all of the passion, joy and sorrow that happened in her life, it seems absurd that, in the end, it is all reduced to ashes in an urn. This is how all of our stories end on this earth.

This short and nearly silent scene captures the significance of Ash Wednesday. The symbol of ashes reminds us of our finiteness, and our finiteness reminds us of the urgency of transforming our hearts and minds.

The more alienated I felt from the church and its leadership, the more the Ash Wednesday ritual seemed like an empty gesture. I had to walk away from church to discover the sacramental meaning of ashes. I had to walk into a darkened theater to undergo that transformation of vision at the heart of the Lenten journey.

Rather than letting me escape my feelings of estrangement, the movies led me more deeply into human reality behind the ritual. It reminded me that there are no limits on the words, images and symbols that God can use to communicate with us.

It was an experience right out of a Catholic novel.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

**Editor's note**: We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the Margins," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **Email alert sign-up** [1]. If you already receive email alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Grace on the Margins" to your list.

**Source URL (retrieved on *08/27/2014 - 20:23*):** http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/finding-meaning-ash-wednesday-darkened-movie-theater

**Links:**
[1] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup