

Ashes are a sign of humbling oneself before God. Receive them and pray for humility.

Lent means repentance. And one definition of repentance is to humble oneself before the Lord. While we forgo the sackcloth of the Old Testament, we still begin the Lenten season with ashes on our forehead, a sign of humility.

But we need to stop here and correct a common misconception. Lots of people think that humility means being down on yourself. Shrinking from a challenge. Being shy, retiring, soft-spoken.

In the Catholic tradition, it means nothing of the sort. We believe that men and women are destined for greatness. Being created in the image of God means that we have incomparable dignity. Even the ancient philosophers, without the benefit of revelation, knew that we human beings have an irrepressible desire to accomplish great deeds and “become someone.” St. Thomas Aquinas and the entire Catholic tradition agree that the desire for excellence and achievement is natural and good, not sinful and proud.

So it was not wrong for James and John (Mark 10:35) to ask to sit at Jesus’s right and left (in Matthew 20:20, it is their Jewish mother who does the lobbying). The problem is, they are clueless about what sitting at Jesus’s right and left means. So Jesus tells them.

It means serving. Till it hurts. Even unto death.

Most would agree that you can’t get any higher or greater than God. But what Jesus comes to reveal to us is a God who is a community of love, three persons whose ceaseless activity, whose joy, consists in giving themselves, each to the other, in love, for all eternity. When the human race is taken captive by sin, the second person of this Holy Trinity empties himself of divine glory and unites himself forever to a human nature in the womb of a virgin. The greatness of divine love means that the omnipotent one now allows himself to become helpless, the infinite one now becomes small, the one who has no needs now becomes vulnerable. In his thirty-three years he does many great deeds—healing the incurable, driving out demons, even raising the dead. But

his greatest deed was to offer himself as a ransom, so that all humanity could be released from its bondage (Isaiah 53:11).

Divine love, agape, charity. It is in this that true greatness lies. When divine love encounters human need and suffering, it will stop at nothing to meet that need and relieve that suffering. Even if it means washing feet, or changing a soiled diaper (a contemporary equivalent of foot-washing), or dying on a cross.

So attaining greatness for us means not to claw our way to the top, stepping on whomever gets in our way. This is pride and is a sign not of strength, but of weakness. Among the Gentiles, “their great ones make their importance felt” (see Mark 10:42) because it comforts them to get acclaim, however insincere, from the masses. It at least temporarily drowns out the inner voice of self-doubt and insecurity that is the hidden motivation of the bully and the dictator.

Humility is possible only for the free. Those who are secure, as Jesus was, in the Father’s love, have no need of pomp and circumstance or people fawning on them. They know who they are, where they’ve come from, and where they are going. Not taking themselves too seriously, they can laugh at themselves. The proud cannot. Notice the similarity between the words *humility* and *humor* (and *human*, for that matter).

Humility means having a true estimate of oneself. Being human means that I’m made in God’s image and likeness. Therefore I’m gifted; I have dignity and a great destiny. But being human also means that I’m a creature, not the Creator. I have limits that I need to recognize and respect. “Remember, man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.” Note how the word *humility* also resembles the word *humus*, that component of soil that makes it fertile.

St. Paul talks about the Christian life as a race, and encourages us to run so as to win (1 Corinthians 9:24ff). So it’s not just OK, it’s commanded to be competitive, to strive to excel. But true greatness consists in sharing in the sacrificial love of Christ, who comes to serve rather than to be served. That means that this race St. Paul is talking about is a race to the bottom.

Examine your media consumption—news, music, TV, sports, and social media. Decide how you can cut back to reduce the noise and open up time for prayer, service, and personal relationship with others. If you have drive time, listen to Catholic radio, talks, or audiobooks instead of news, sports, and music (see suggestions in the Lenten Resources, on page 116).

George Gallup once conducted a poll called “Religion in America.” He studied two groups of Americans: regular churchgoers from various Christian churches on the one hand, and totally unchurched people on the other. He quizzed both groups on issues ranging from the divinity of Jesus, to cheating on income tax, infidelity in marriage, and abortion.

His findings were shocking. Fully 88 percent of the churchgoers had answers identical to those of the unchurched people. Only 12 percent of the churchgoers had opinions and lifestyles that were recognizably Christian.

Hold it! Ephesians 4:17–24 tells us that to be a Christian means to live in a radically different way than the pattern offered by the pagan society that surrounds us. Being a Christian means acquiring a new mind and becoming a new person who reflects the image and likeness of a holy God.

So why don’t 88 percent of churchgoers get it? They have presumably heard this passage in Church more than once.

Maybe it is because the adage is true—you are what you eat.

Recently I heard someone quip that if you are what you eat, most Americans are fast, easy, and cheap. But scarier than what we put into our mouths is what we put into our minds. The average American watches about twenty hours of TV per week. When not watching the tube, we are often online, scanning a magazine, or listening to our iPods. Should we be surprised that our values generally reflect the values of the entertainment industry and news media? After all, you are what you eat.

That’s why Jesus offers himself to us as the bread of life, the bread that comes down from heaven. Since the sixteenth century, people have often debated the meaning of John 6. Should we interpret the manna from heaven

to be his Word—or rather, the Eucharist? The Mass shows us that it need not be either/or. An ancient tradition dating back to the early Church Fathers says that we feed on Christ from two tables, the table of the Word, symbolized by the ambo, and the table of the Eucharist, which is the altar.

Each Mass offers a feast of God's Word not only in the readings but in the prayers and acclamations which are often direct quotes or paraphrases from Scripture. The Word of God in the liturgy is like a double-edged sword (see Hebrews 4:12) that penetrates deep, challenging us, healing our wounds, enlightening our minds, directing our steps. It stimulates the eyes of faith to recognize the Body and Blood of Christ under the humble signs of bread and wine. The Eucharist is indeed the most substantial food he offers us. We are called to be the Body of Christ. Why did he give us his Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity under the forms of bread and wine? Because you are what you eat.

Lots of Catholics who regularly come to Mass are part of the 88 percent nominal majority. Why is that? Because the Word and the Eucharist can only be eaten by faith and digested by those who are not bloated with junk food. Many scarcely hear the Sunday readings because their minds are filled with the song they were listening to on the way to Church or the items on their to-do list. Many hear but quickly forget since they don't feed on God's Word again until the next time they are at Sunday Mass.

If we carefully examined the 12 percent of churchgoers with a recognizably Christian lifestyle, I bet we'd find that most of them shy away from intellectual junk food, coming to Mass hungry (maybe that's the point of the hour-long pre-Communion fast). I bet they provide some time to digest the Word and the Eucharist through regular moments of quiet prayer throughout the week. And I bet they are smart enough to know that you don't eat just once a week and expect to run the race to win (see 1 Corinthians 9:24). Like the Israelites in the desert, these Christians gather the manna of God's Word every day and make it their daily bread. Some even attend the Eucharist daily.

Besides their lives being more inspiring, the lives of the 12 percent in Gallup's poll exhibited one further characteristic. They were considerably happier than both the unchurched and the nominal Christians who were

equally plagued with a vague sense of emptiness.

Junk food may taste good, but it often leaves you with indigestion. But the Bread of Life satisfies. We were made for it. As Jesus says, “No one who comes to me shall ever be hungry, no one who believes in me shall thirst again” (see John 6:35).

DAY 3

Plan to get to confession at least once during Lent after making an extensive examination of conscience.

As I crossed the great divide of puberty, I formed a vivid image of God. He was a grumpy old man on a throne with a frown on his face. Every time anyone tried to have a little fun, he'd shout, "Thou shalt not!"

To really live and not just exist, you had to do the daring, "sinful" things. What the Bible calls "sin" is where the action is, it seemed.

This is what I believed because this is what I was taught in the movies I watched and the books I read. It's what I heard in the locker room and in the checkout line, from men and women, young and old. Everybody appeared to accept this as a matter of fact.

Behind this widespread perception is a very successful propaganda campaign unparalleled in the history of humanity. In fact it goes back to the very beginnings of humanity—all the way back to the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 3).

Think of it for a minute. The triune God, completely sufficient in himself and needing nothing, decides to create paradise out of chaos in an act of sheer generosity. He creates creatures of all shapes and sizes, and appoints as caretakers of them all a pair who is created in God's own image and likeness, with intellect and will, freedom and responsibility. Their assigned activity is to love one another intimately, to walk daily with God in the cool of the evening, and simply enjoy paradise. Any duties? Sort of. They had to tend the garden, which was maintenance-free given the fact that neither thorn nor thistle, neither drought nor Japanese beetle had as yet arrived on the scene. And there was one more responsibility: to avoid eating the fruit of a particular tree, since it would kill them. But how hard was that, given all the other luscious fruit available in the garden?

Then appears a slithering reptile who had given them nothing of what they enjoyed. But now he has the nerve to give them advice.

“Did God say you’d die if you ate this fruit? Nonsense! He only said that because eating this fruit would make you his equal, and he can’t bear that. You see, he created you to enslave you. He wants to keep you under his foot. He’s keeping the best for himself. You listen to him and you’ll be missing out on real life. You’ll never be free.”

Thus began the deceptive advertising campaign that lasts till this day, the glamorization of death. For that truly is what sin is about, and that’s why God says, “Thou shalt not.” He is not a crabby prude, but a loving Father. He knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us more than we love ourselves. So he does what every parent does. “Don’t touch the stove; you’ll get burnt.” “Don’t play at the top of the stairs; you’ll fall and break your neck.”

Our first parents believed the liar instead of the Father. They fell and broke their relationship with God and shattered the innocent intimacy they had with one another. As soon as it started, their family fragmented with Cain killing Abel. Thorns and thistles appeared, paradise was lost, and death came into the world.

Lent begins with the memory of how the first head of the human family buckled under the pressure of the lies. But more importantly, we remember how the New Adam (see Romans 5) went another round with the deceiver and vanquished him through the power of the Word of God (see Matthew 4:1–11).

Our task during these forty days is to examine our lives in light of God’s Word and see where we’ve allowed darkness to creep in, where we’ve taken the bait of the diabolical fisher of men. It’s time to use the sword of the Spirit to cut through his web of deception, to free ourselves from the net that holds us as prey.

That is why Lent is called a joyful season of freedom. The purple color of repentance is also the color of royalty—it’s the time to recognize our true identity and claim our true birthright as free sons and daughters of a loving Father who happens to be the King of the Universe.

DAY 4

Examine your consumption patterns. Is there anything you can sacrifice for a while? Starbucks? A few beers? Restaurant meals or movies? Cut back and give the saved money to those in need.

Everyone knows that Lent is about sacrifice. So it's only fitting at the beginning of Lent to recall one of the most famous sacrifices of all time.

Here's the background. Abraham really only desires one thing: a son who will lead to descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky. The only problem is that his wife is barren and advanced in years. So he tries to solve the problem in his own way, and produces a son by a slave girl. This doesn't work out very well, and both the slave and her son are sent away. Next God intervenes, works a miracle, and causes the elderly Sarah to conceive and bear a son. Isaac, then, is not only the legitimate firstborn son of Abraham but his last hope. There is absolutely nothing more precious to Abraham than Isaac. Indeed, to give up his son would be to give up himself.

This, by the way, is the true meaning of sacrifice in the ancient world. God deserves everything because he has given us everything. So ancient peoples instinctively knew that authentic sacrifice could never be just a nod to God. Rather, it had to be big and precious enough to represent their entire lives. That's why human sacrifice was so prevalent in ancient times—the offering of the firstborn was seen as the only adequate worship of the gods responsible for our very existence. In Genesis 22, God stops Abraham before he slays his son. The ordeal was just a test to see if Abraham was truly devoted to God in faith, obedience, and gratitude. God does not want Isaac's blood...only Abraham's heart. So he provides a substitute, a ram, which shows the true meaning of all authentic sacrifice—we give to God something precious that represents our very selves.

But the image of Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice up the slope of Mt. Moriah should tip us off that this story points beyond itself to a future sacrifice beyond all comprehension. The ram caught in the thicket is not the

true substitute, and the true sacrifice does not take place upon Moriah. It is the Lamb, not the ram, God's Son, not Abraham's, that is offered. Like Isaac, he carried the wood of the sacrifice up the slope of Mt. Calvary. But unlike Isaac, he did so freely, knowing what that sacrifice would cost him. And his sacrifice accomplishes what no animal sacrifice possibly could—the eternal salvation of all who are willing to accept this free gift of love.

This is what the whole story is about. From Genesis to Revelation, the theme is the astonishing love of God. The love of the Father for his Incarnate Word: "This is my Son, my Beloved" (Mark 9:7). The love of the Father who sacrifices that beloved Son for us (see John 3:16). The love of the Son who leaves behind the brilliant cloud of Mt. Tabor for the agony of Calvary.

Though it is we who owe everything to God, it is he who sacrifices everything for us. Our love for him can only be a faint echo of his unstoppable love for us. "Is it possible that he who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for the sake of us all will not grant us all things besides?" (see Romans 8:32).

So this is the true meaning of Lenten sacrifice. We renew and deepen our dedication to him and express that by sacrificing something meaningful to us. But as we go about our fasting and almsgiving, let's not forget to give him some extra time in prayer. After all, on the Mount of Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:5), God did not ask us to give up chocolate. But, after identifying Jesus as his beloved Son, he did give us a very clear command. He said, "Listen to him!"