

Homily for Ash Wednesday Day of Recollection

Readings: Joel 2:12-18 | 2 Cor 5:20–6:2 | Matt 6:1-6, 16-18

Dear Friends,

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return”

Today, this Ash Wednesday, as we well know in this seminary, is a day of prayer and fasting. Of course, it marks the beginning of the holy season of Lent. It is a time of renewal of our faith and of reconciliation with God.

When I was pastor at Our Lady of Guadalupe in Houston, the largest and first parish for immigrants from Mexico, founded in 1912, I was amazed and edified by the crowds of the faithful who were drawn to our Masses and services on Ash Wednesday. The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Ash Wednesday were the most important “holy” days of the year. We would begin at 6:00am and end at 10:00 or later in the night. This day is not a holy day of obligation and it falls in the middle of the week. Many who do not come to Mass regularly on Sunday still want to come to church on Ash Wednesday. The message of Ash Wednesday: **“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return”** resonates with faithful and faith-filled people of God.

This year Ash Wednesday may take on a deeper meaning for us. Many things have been different since the pandemic began in the middle of Lent last year. As we remember and mourn those we have lost in our families and in our country; as we

acknowledge the challenges and sufferings we have endured; we are reminded daily of our own mortality. **“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.”** As we see hope in the vaccines that many are starting to receive, may we also find hope in the promise of Christ’s resurrection and the new life it offers all of us.

This day marks the first day of the 40 days of Lent, a time we dedicate to prayer, fasting, almsgiving and reflection in preparation for the celebration of Christ’s Paschal Mystery in the Easter Triduum. This is the acceptable time for us to refocus our lives and to reconcile with God and with one another.

“When you give alms ... When you pray ... When you fast ...”

In Jesus’ words to his disciples which we hear in today’s Gospel, he takes it for granted that his disciples will do these things: **it’s not if, but when.** Jesus’ audience, it seems, need no encouragement to give alms, to pray, and to fast, but rather a word of warning: they are not to parade these good deeds before other people, but to do them inconspicuously – indeed, secretly.

Not always easy for us to do. We’re human. We want to be appreciated, we want to be acknowledged for our good deeds! Look at me! This is the best Ash Wednesday homily EVER!!! Right? Right?

Lent, dear friends, calls us to give to those who are most in need in acts of service and charity, to give them hope, nourishment, and comfort.

This has been a tough year for us in a lot of ways. We have the pandemic. We have seen a lot of violence and division in our

country. We have had many challenges and changes in the workplace, in schools, in our churches, in the places that we frequent in our daily lives. Many of us have felt isolated and overworked, without much chance for rest and relaxation. Lent can help us to look at our lives and to put all of this into perspective.

The prophet Joel asks us: *“to rend our hearts, not our garments, and to return to the Lord our God with our whole heart.”* Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians tells us: *“Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”*

As we begin this time of grace, may the Lord help us turn our hearts to him. Let the ashes that mark us today remind us of the need of repentance and conversion. May our repentance be truthful, humble, and sincere. May our prayer be humble and may our acts of charity be generous and gracious, without restriction or conditions. During this holy season of Lent, may our loving God lead us on the path of holiness.