

Ash Wednesday and Penance

March 10, 2019

“And now there remain faith, hope and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.” 1 Cor. 13:13

The Sunday before Lent the Church has us read St. Paul’s beautiful passage on charity from his first letter to the Corinthians. She has us read this because it is important at all times, but particularly when we are striving for spiritual improvement, like we are during Lent. Our penances must be characterized by the glow of charity, which originates from a contrite heart in the state of grace. This state of grace, or charity, is necessary to gain merit for heaven. On Ash Wednesday, we began the penitential season by being marked with blessed ashes, a sign of penance and sacrifice.

Ashes are placed on our foreheads with the words: “Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return.” The ceremony hearkens back to the early Church when public sinners were given sackcloths and ashes so they could make public repentance for their sins. In time, the ceremony was extended to all sinners, for all are in need of conversion, a turning to God. We are signed with ashes to mark the beginning of Lent, a period of sacrifice and spiritual renewal. We should receive the ashes with humility and a spirit of penance, then make sure our works are marked by charity.

We are not meant to eat the ashes, but rather to break from the bad habits, vices and sins that have caused us to end up in the ashes and dust. We promised at our baptism that we would renounce Satan and all his pomp and works. At the Easter Vigil, we will once again renew our baptismal promises. Let us see that Lent is a preparation for that renewal, by our sacrifices done with charity.

Have a holy Lent.

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