

Ash Wednesday -Memento Mori

Ash Wednesday is the start of Lent, a forty-day season for Christians leading up to Holy Thursday that is the first feast of the “Big Three” celebrations: the Triduum of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. Besides Christmas and Easter, among the other holydays that are part of the church calendar such as All Saints’ Day and Ascension Thursday, Ash Wednesday is the most popular. A lot of people go to a nearby church to be marked with ashes on their foreheads as the minister says, “Repent and believe in the Gospel,” or “Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.” You would think that such stark declarations would not invite so many fans, but they do.

I think Ash Wednesday is popular because at unarticulated levels people sense that they are incomplete, having empty or even dark spaces within that need to be filled or eradicated, or that they possess within themselves possibilities for goodness yet to be fulfilled. There is a mysterious yearning for the divine that people recognize by being marked with ashes. Perhaps this “Memento Mori” this ashen reminder of and reference to death and the fragile and passing nature of life bring to focus the need to use the gift that is life as it was meant to be lived.

As kids we would ask each other, “What did you give up for Lent?” The answer was usually, “candy,” in those days, but more meaningful sacrifices came to be made as we grew older and saw how fasting or leaving aside things, attitudes, or habits made space for something better to reside in us.

This kind of “clearing out” that we can do during Lent can help us see what is most important in life. Moving aside life’s clutter that we collect along the way can allow us to “value the things that really matter” (Philippians 1:10), and to direct our lives to “all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, admirable, decent, virtuous, or worthy of praise.” (Philippians 4:8) We can see examples of this sort of extreme focus on what is valued in the athletes competing in the Winter Olympics that are ongoing as Lent begins. From early ages they have left aside most of what is part of ordinary life to learn, to train, to compete, to refine, and to perfect their performance in their chosen sport.

For churchgoers, the observance of Lent leads up to the renewal of their baptismal vows, re-dedicating themselves to faith in their Creator, persistence in imitating Jesus, and allowing the indwelling Spirit to be made manifest in their lives. There are not as many churchgoers these days as there used to be, but however we observe Lent, within or outside of organized religion, we can seek the same re-commitment to what we know to be divine in our lives. The Forty Days is our own mini-Olympic training time to how we are living as followers of Jesus by asking ourselves if his values are reflected in what is most important to us, what motivates us, and what is evident in our everyday lives.

We need Lent to help us reject what is dark and evil and to turn toward what we know God intended for the world. It is a helpful season for us as individuals, but also for our society as we give witness to something other than the divisions, hatreds, and negativity that abound.

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