

## ASH WEDNESDAY

As you may know, the person who distributes ashes on Ash Wednesday has a choice between two admonitions that may be said as he places the ashes on each person's forehead. One of them, almost certainly the more commonly used, is: "Repent and believe in the Gospel." This is fully in accord with all three of our readings and may be the reason why it is normally chosen. The passage from the prophet Joel begins on this very theme:

Yet even now—oracle of the Lord—return to me with your whole heart,

with fasting, weeping, and mourning.

Rend your hearts, not your garments,

and return to the Lord.

So, too, our reading from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, where the Apostle writes: "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God," and again: "We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain." And finally, in the Gospel, Jesus speaks of three preeminent ways in which we can manifest genuine repentance: by almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

The other admonition that the priest may select as he imposes ashes is this: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." This is not so obviously related to the three readings, but it may also sound a bit too stark to be normally selected by the minister. It is,

however, very much in accord with a prayer that the priest may pray as he blesses the ashes, for part of that prayer goes like this: “O God, ... be pleased to bless these ashes, which we intend to receive upon our heads, that we, who acknowledge we are but ashes and shall return to dust, may, through a steadfast observance of Lent, gain pardon for our sins and newness of life.”

The recent death of our longtime Oblate Catherine Roberts makes it especially fitting to reflect on the reality of death at the beginning of this Lenten season. Catherine was a devout woman who had been well aware for months that she was dying, and yet she did not rebel or feel that God was in any way treating her unfairly. She gratefully and gracefully received the Anointing of the Sick, welcomed visitors to her sickbed, and in general gave those of us who knew her a wonderful example of how to draw near the end of one’s earthly life.

Needless to say, not everyone reacts in this exemplary way. Just a few days ago I heard of a man who, like Catherine, had been diagnosed with a very serious cancer, but that poor man is in a terrible state of mind: depressed, angry, withdrawn, unwilling to speak with his friends about his state. Similarly, a couple months ago one of our Oblates introduced me to a blogsite on the Internet in which various believing Catholics were expressing quite disparate opinions about how one would best face a diagnosis of a fatal illness and impending death. Some of the bloggers were quite unwilling to accept such a diagnosis with anything approaching the attitude of Catherine Roberts, but were instead writing about prayers for miraculous cures so they could live still longer. Our own Oblate entered the fray with the wry observation that of the canonized saints, those who are for us the model “cloud of witnesses” spoken of in the Letter to the Hebrews, every single one of them has died: 100% consistency!

I have also always been taken by something Dorothy Day once said in a filmed interview. When her own mother was quite old and suffering a serious illness, she said to her daughter: “Dorothy, don’t pray that I live still longer. I’ve been through the San Francisco earthquake, a Florida hurricane, and two World Wars. I think I’ve had enough.”

More seriously, if we really take to heart what many of us once learned in the *Baltimore Catechism*—that we are here on earth “to know, love, and serve God in this life and to be happy with him forever in the next”—and if we recognize that the only way to reach that ultimate goal is through the gateway of death, then this is not a fate to be at all dreaded. Rather, we will readily be able to follow that “instrument of good works” found in the fourth chapter of St. Benedict’s Rule: to keep death daily before one’s eyes, something that we ought to be able to do not fearfully but even with faith-filled expectation. May our observance of this season of Lent strengthen us in that resolve, especially as we receive the sacrament of the Eucharist, for this is actually at all times, and not just near the time of death, our “viaticum,” our nourishment along the way.