

Ash Wednesday 2012  
February 22, 2012  
Fr. Tom Elliott

# Community from Ashes

Joel 2:12-18  
Psalm 51  
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Last weekend, Deacon Chuck Farrar highlighted the importance of community in his homily. This is the very same topic that Pope Benedict XVI highlighted in his annual Lenten message this year. As we begin our Lenten journey today, I invite us to look at how the importance of community is celebrated on Ash Wednesday and throughout the season of Lent.

First, the ashes that we distribute at our celebration of Ash Wednesday remind us of our communal sinfulness. Beginning in the Old Testament, we learn how sinfulness is not something merely individual; there is always a communal aspect to our personal sinfulness. Often, whole groups, cities, and even nations would repent of their sins. They would do this by sprinkling ashes on themselves as a sign of their humble sorrow for their sins. In the book of Judith, when the Israelites repented of their sins, they “prostrated themselves in front of the temple building, with ashes strewn on their heads, displaying their sackcloth covering before the Lord” (Judith 4:11).

Our celebration of Ash Wednesday is our standing together, marked with ashes, in humble sorrow for our sins. Our sins are communal, so our contrition is communal. As our sins affect many, so God’s mercy transforms many.

The ashes we receive today also remind us of our communal identity. In the book of Revelation, we read that Christians will be marked with the sign of God. Most people are very familiar with the references to those who will be marked with the “sign of the beast,” but few Christians are aware of the references to God’s children being marked. In chapter seven of the book of Revelation, we read, “the number of those who had been marked with the seal [was] one hundred and forty-four thousand... from every tribe...” (Revelation 7:4). This number is symbolic of a large number of people from every tribe of people. These people were “sealed” with the mark of God.

We know from the New Testament that the most significant and symbolic mark from Christians is the sign of the cross; so much so that Saint Paul mentions that there is nothing he can boast in except the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> The symbol of the cross that is traced on our foreheads with ashes reminds us that we are one body in Christ, one family of faith, one community of believers who has been forgiven and saved in Christ.

The communal penances that we do during the season of Lent remind us of our solidarity with one another in prayer and overcoming sin. For example, we all abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent. We don’t do this because meat is evil, but rather, because it’s a beautiful way for us to show our prayerful solidarity with one another. The same thing is true for the days

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 6:14

of fasting during Lent; we join with millions of other Christians around the world offering up the prayer of fasting in solidarity with one another. That is both beautiful and powerful!

We enter our Lenten journey, in preparation for Easter, not merely as individuals, but as a family and community of faith! May God bless our spiritual journey through Lent. May these 40 days and 40 nights be a time of spiritual growth as a community of faith and as a parish family!

**SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:**

- ✚ Share with God the ways in which your Lenten sacrifices/prayers for the next 40 days and 40 nights will draw you more deeply into communion with others and with Him.