

Column022320

Companions on the Journey

February 23, 2020

Dear Friends,

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. It is not an official Holy Day on the Church's universal calendar but for many Catholics it feels like a holy day. It actually feels more like a holy day than some of the official holy days like the Solemnity of Mary on January 1st or the Feast of the Ascension some forty days after Easter and thus a moveable feast each year.

There is something rather primordial about Ash Wednesday. First of all, no matter what the personal circumstances in the life of a given Catholic all can approach to receive ashes on their foreheads. It is public and it is a sign of one's Catholic faith. It is visible for all to see.

The ashes themselves are made from palm branches that are burned. The palm branches are from last Palm Sunday when they were distributed at the Masses to those who attended. The palms were blessed and then taken into the homes of our parishioners to be placed near crucifixes or other religious articles to serve as a daily reminder of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and our own need both to welcome him but to remain faithful and not turn away from him as even his own disciples did.

I have been burning palm branches for over forty-five years. It takes a lot of palm even to make just a small portion of ashes. Sometimes when children hear that the palm is burned they think that the ashes will still be hot on their foreheads and they are afraid. Of course, we try to reassure them that they are not hot. Actually we often mix the ashes with holy water to enable them to adhere to the forehead more readily.

But here's the point. Ashes on the forehead are to be a sign. Of? Of the faith in my heart for Jesus Christ and his way of life—in all the dimensions of life. The ashes are a way of proclaiming (wordlessly) that Jesus is Lord in my life. That his cross, like the cross on my forehead, is the sign of my salvation and the victory of God's grace over the forces of hatred and evil in this world. The ashes on my forehead are a sign to others that the way of Christ is something that you can expect me to be striving to live. In effect, the ashes on my forehead hand to those around me an opportunity to challenge me if they see me not living in accord with the way of Jesus.

When you and I were baptized the actual baptismal ceremony begins by the priest or deacon tracing on the forehead of the child to be baptized the sign of the cross with a thumb or forefinger. Then the parents and Godparents are invited also to trace the cross on the forehead of the child. From the very beginning the cross of the Lord saves the little ones. Our wearing that cross and making the sign of the

cross is the mark of our identity as Catholics all the days of our lives. And well it should be so.

Peace,

Msgr. McHenry