

Dust and Ashes

“Remember, O Man, that thou art dust, and to dust thou shall return.” These were the words that I spoke to each man, woman, and child that stood before me last Wednesday, as I smeared ashes on their foreheads in the form of a cross. Ponderous words from a solemn moment of Catholic Liturgy.

From nine in the morning until eight at night, four fellow clergyman and I spent the entire day in cassock and armed with dishes of ash. Six prayer services were held in the Church—Resurrection Parish in Rye, New York—and we visited a school, afternoon catechism classes, and a massive assisted living residence on our mission to distribute ashes to the faithful. I have not tried to count the number of crosses I sketched that day, but beyond three hundred wouldn’t surprise me.

A memorable part of the day was kneeling down in elementary school classrooms to properly paint a cross on the younger boys and girls. One curly-haired little lady stands out particularly from the rest in my memory, because she followed my darkened thumb from the dish to her forehead—going completely cross-eyed by the time I touched her. Realizing this, she looked up at me with both eyes and then giggled back to her place in the classroom.

At the nursing home, we followed a Catholic member of the staff to what seemed like hundreds of residents, some eagerly awaiting our arrival, and others not so sure of what to expect. I remember one elderly woman, sitting upright with her eyes closed on an inclined hospital bed, her shoulders and neck bare, who started when our guide awoke her, recoiling from his touch. After he explained the reason for his visit she cried, “Just put them on me and go away!” After trying to quell my fears of producing a similar reaction with my own introduction, I stepped forward to her bedside, trying to look intently into her eyes and her situation. It is amazing what a peaceful look and some simple human conversation can do! Lo and behold: not five seconds passed before her attitude changed completely and she received her ashes with joy.

The most powerful moments of the day, however, came in the Church. “Remember, O Man, that thou art dust,” I would say as I etched the vertical bar of the cross, following it with the second stroke of ash, “And to dust thou shall return.” The words echoed like a hammer strike at every repetition, bringing home the reality of the moment, penetrating to the depths of the soul. I could see the impact that those words and the touch of ashes wrought on many of the people that day, in their eyes, facial expressions, and solemn verbal responses. To hear those words accompanied by ashes upon one’s head is a grave and ponderous experience.

However, this weight affords not grief, but consolation. We spend so much time keeping up appearances, convincing others and ourselves that everything is fine; that we have our lives under control, and that underneath the surface there is nothing to hide or be ashamed of. It is a natural tendency, and perhaps even a good one—we cannot always go around burdening others with our troubles and worries—but our sins and our miseries are part of the truth about us, and trying to cover them up is a lie.

Every once in a while, therefore, there is a need to remember that we are dust; that mixed in with our high ideals and aspirations lurks a subtle hint of struggle and mourning. Trying to deny it would be to ignore the truth. The consolation of dust and ashes is precisely this: an experience of the solidity of truth. Only by coming to grips with our lowliness can we find peace in ourselves. Only by facing our own faults can we mend our relationships with others. Only by turning away from our sin, our dust and ashes, can we open ourselves to the transforming power of God.