

## Homily – March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025 – Ash Wednesday

At the Sunday Mass, 6 ½ weeks ago at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church, we celebrated a special ritual within the R.C.I.A. process with seven wonderful



people who will be joining the Church at the upcoming Easter Vigil. Perhaps the most powerful part of this ritual came when their sponsors, with obvious gestures, made the sign of the cross over various parts of the candidates' bodies, beginning with the head and ending the candidates' feet. From their heads to the tips of

their toes, we placed these candidates under the sign of the Cross. That ritual reminds me of the Lenten journey we are all invited to, not just the candidates. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday with the signing of our heads in ashes, and Lent ends on Holy Thursday at our feet with the washing of our feet. If we ask the candidates to be “all in,” then the rest of us have to be all in as well.

We call it the “imposition of ashes.” The ashes are *imposed*, never chosen. If they weren't imposed I, for one, would probably choose any but ashes. Maybe that's what Jesus was getting at when he told us to take up our cross if we wanted to follow him. Like the ashes and like the Cross, life itself can impose much on each of us that nobody in their right mind would deliberately seek

out. Yet, true discipleship, much like wedding vows, asks us to say yes to the whole paschal mystery—for richer and for poorer, for better and for worse, for sickness and for health.

There is a board game, perhaps you've played it, call Hedbanz (a play on the word headbands). Each round of the game, a card is imposed, you might say, on your forehead. On the card is a word that is your identity. You, yourself, cannot see your identity—your card--so you have to ask the other players yes-and-no questions until you find out who you are. Now, if you wanted to cheat, you could excuse yourself, go to the bathroom and look in the mirror to reveal the word stuck to your head.

Perhaps that's what Lent is like, a 40-day invitation to find out who we truly are, an invitation to look in the mirror, and to accept, love, and strive to be the best version of ourselves. But like the game, we need others to help us. Usually none of us can see our own game, our own sin, our own flaws, our own shortcomings. We seemingly cannot see how we are mistreating the earth and its poorest inhabitants. We need others to mirror our truth back to us.

Lent is not a season of optimism, but it is a season of hope. An optimistic person screens out everything that is negative, everything they don't like about themselves or the world around them. An optimistic person says, "I have one week of vacation, and it's going to be sunny and warm every day of that week." Optimistic people are convinced they are going to live to be 100, never have a health issue, and die peacefully in their sleep. They will not accept any other way of living or dying. Optimistic people tend to live with their heads in the

sand, pushing away everything that challenges their peace of mind. They feel good, but at the price of deliberately screening out anything negative that might bring them down. That's the world of optimism, hope's counterfeit.

People of faith, on the other hand, are people of hope and not merely optimists. Hope never pushes anything away, but trusts in the fact that God accompanies us in the good and the bad, in sickness and in health, when we're rich and when we're poor. Faith is the ability to say "yes" to what is right in front, to say "yes" to reality even when it's the last thing we would ever choose given the choice.

Saying yes to the entire paschal mystery, the dying and the rising of all things, is not easy. Perhaps the only way we can say yes to the ashes on our heads, to the things that are death-dealing, is to know that they are not ultimate. Ashes and crosses are real; they're just not eternal. When we say yes to joining Jesus in the tomb, we are also saying yes to sharing in his resurrection. Everything that feels like sickness, weakness, poverty, loss of control, and even death will eventually give way to strength, health, richness and eternal life.

The stain of the ashes on our foreheads will only and finally be washed off in the waters of baptism at Eastertime. In the Easter waters we join Jesus who, like our R.C.I.A. candidates, is "all in." It is Jesus himself who claims you, loves you, and redeems you, from the top of your head to the tips of your toes.

~Fr. Phil

