



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

Ash Wednesday

After the fire ash alone remains

Readings: *Joel 2: 12-18, Ps 50, 2 Corinthians 5: 20-6:2, Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18*

Ash remains after the burning. When the flames have died down and the last glow has retreated from the embers, ash remains. Ash is a sign that the fire has passed through.

Tonight we omitted the penitential rite in the Mass for it to be replaced by the solemn ashing of our foreheads and we will be reminded of our mortality and our temporality. *'Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.'* The sooty smudge on our flesh will be the remembrance that we, the animated dust of dead stars, will, after the brief integration of our mortal creation, disperse once more to elemental matter, disintegrating into countless millions of motes of molecules caught in a passing shaft of light. We receive the ash as a sign of humility, the humus, the earth to which this house of clay will surely return. It is our nod to the lot of Fallen Man, the long end of our solidarity in Adam.

But if the ash were no more than that we could sit at home and get depressed about our fate without either benefit of clergy or solemn ceremonial. The ash with which we are smeared is reminder of more than our mortality. In the remembrance of its passing through the fire it takes us deep into the mystery of the Faith. Our foundational saints, Peter and Paul,

both remind us that all our works will be tested by fire. What is of gold will survive. What is wood and straw will perish. But we will not be lost. Rather, we will be purified. And that is the very source of our word, 'pure'. The Greek word for 'fire' is PUR. Our purification here and in the Purification beyond death, The Purgatorio, is preparing us, not for destruction but for the Presence of the Divine.

A further clue is in the origin of the ash with which we are daubed. It is from the burning of the palm crosses of the previous Holy Week. We are linked directly thereby to the Passion of Jesus. As we begin this Lenten Season of purification we enter the fire. But this is not the fire of destruction. It is the fire of the Seraphim, the burning ones who guard the Presence. It is the fire of the Divine energy. It is the fire of the Lux Mundi, the light that enlightens every man who comes into the world. It is the fire of God's warm affection for his erring children. It is the fire of Divine Love that alone can make us pure and fit for eternity with Him.

Today, coincidentally, is St. Valentine's Day. All over the world some people will be receiving an anonymous card pledging undying love and signed with a simple cross – a kiss. Not everyone, for a million different reasons, will receive this affirmation of commitment and passion. But every follower of Christ who comes to Ash Wednesday will receive the kiss of God on their forehead – the Cross of Jesus that says 'I love you and I will never leave you'.

After the fire ash alone remains. This is not the ash of final conflagration but the sign of Divine love and eternal glory.