



Ash Wednesday Mass Homily
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
February 13, 2013
Cathedral of St. Joseph

Thank you for coming on this Ash Wednesday, as we begin the season of Lent, a season of reflection, conversion and preparation for the joy of Easter.

Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. These familiar words spoken first by the Lord to Adam in the Book of Genesis will be spoken to each of you as you receive ashes on your foreheads placed there in the sign of the cross. It is recognition that the human condition is affected by sin. It is not a put down but an acknowledgement of the reality of our limited human nature and of our mortality. Ashes on the forehead are an outward sign of our desire for interior conversion.

After an Ash Wednesday service a little boy asked his mother, “is it true that we are made of dust?” “Yes,” she responded. “And is it true that we go back to dust again when we die?” “Yes, dear.” “Well. Mommy, when I said my prayers last night I looked under the bed and saw someone who is either coming or going.”

The fact is that we are all going every day of our lives and ultimately on the last day our lives will change. We need to prepare for that last day but especially we need to recognize that life is precious and fragile, all life from conception to natural death, and life is always filled with change.

As I have reflected on and grieved over the decision of Pope Benedict XVI to resign as Bishop of Rome and spiritual father of the universal church and of us all, the truth that unexpected change is ever with us is clear. Today when we pray the Mass we will refer to Benedict our Pope. In two weeks we will pray for no one as Pope. A few weeks later we will pray another name the Holy Spirit will help select. The truth is that while we ought to pray for one another including our leaders, it is to Christ to whom we commit our lives. He is the same yesterday, today and forever.

We are all on a journey and the season of Lent encourages us to remind ourselves that to dust we shall return. But we will do so in the bright light of the Resurrection, if we have our house in order.

Lent, therefore, is not a time for gloom but for hope. It is a time for reflection on how our lives are going, the health of our patterns of behavior, the strength of our relationships with one another, and the depth of our relationship with God. Such reflection ought to lead us to repentance. A little girl defined true repentance as being sorry enough to quit. Repentance is quitting not under pressure but because we choose to do so, yearning for the peace that comes with being one with encountering Christ personally in our hearts, knowing of his love and mercy for us.

Each of us is faced with the tensions of how to balance often conflicting demands of body, mind and spirit in morally appropriate ways and how to deflect the temptations of the Evil one to believe we can go it alone. One tradition during Lent is to give up something, to fast from something, to exercise self-discipline in a new way. Archbishop Fulton Sheen said “self-discipline never means giving up anything, for giving up is a loss. Our Lord did not ask us to give up the things of the earth, but to exchange them for better things.” The better thing is a right relationship with Christ through His Church. One focus for our Lenten reflection this year, in the midst of change, might be how to better appreciate and take advantage of the gift of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church instituted by Christ to guide and support us on our journey to holiness.

May these forty days be ones of renewal and reconciliation for each of you. May Our Lady, Mother of Mercy, watch over you.