

eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). For that reason, this is why we can also make the sign of the cross (#6) at the Benediction. God's face shines upon us, is gracious unto us, and grants us His peace because of Christ crucified.

The image of the cross of Christ is also seen on Ash Wednesday. The tradition of the imposition of ashes teaches us some more Christ-centered things. By the way, in case you didn't put it together yet, human traditions have this primary purpose in the Church: they put Christ in the center and they adorn the Gospel.

In the case of the imposition of ashes, which is also a practice of Christian freedom, first, the ashes themselves remind us of God's Word to Adam in the Garden after the Fall into sin: **"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19).** It teaches us the consequence of sin. It teaches us our own mortality. For as Paul writes in **Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death."**

Second, the imposition of ashes also teaches us about our *neighbor's* own mortality. When we see the ashes on someone's forehead at the grocery store or here at Church, we are instantly reminded, they, too, will die, and that means all life is precious, and we need to **"love our neighbor as ourselves" (Mt 22:39),** doing what we can in Christian love to help and support them in every physical need as the 5th Commandment instructs.

Third, the imposition of ashes in the shape of the cross illustrates for us that Christ died on it for our sins. By now, you have heard about the cross over and over again. And that's the point. For the Christian, everything is about the cross. Jesus died that we might live. So whenever we look at ourselves in a mirror with the ashes, we are instantly reminded that not only will we die, but Christ first died. Yet the cross is empty. Christ didn't stay dead. He rose again. So even now because of Christ's promise our own mortality has the promise of immortality.

Now the external demonstration of piety has warnings. The use of outward piety is a cautionary tale. There are wrong things – even sinful things – that can arise from a wrong way of using them. If you make the sign of the cross or if you get ashes on your forehead, and think you're a better Christian than others because of it, don't even put your three fingers together, and don't come to receive them. If you give something up for Lent because it makes you feel like a more pious Christian because of it, don't bother giving it up. Jesus teaches this very clearly in the Gospel reading today when He says, **"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 6:1).**

Remember what Joel writes in the Old Testament reading, "Rend your hearts and not your garments." A Christian can be externally pious, but it is all for nothing if he is not first internally pious. External piety without the rending of a contrite heart that seeks the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake is no godliness at all. Period. No exceptions.

As long as your external acts of piety are instructing you how to confess your sin, and/or are urging and directing you where to go for the forgiveness of sins, and/or are actively serving your neighbor either by confessing Christ-centeredness or adorning the Gospel, then keep doing them. But if you find yourself thinking that you just want others to see you do them, stop! Take Jesus' warning in the Gospel reading to heart! And then rend your heart, confess your sin, and come to our loving Savior to receive Absolution. We are but dust and to dust we shall return. As the Introit taught us, "You have mercy on all, O Lord, and abhor nothing you have made. You look past the sins of men that they may repent. You spare them because you are our Lord, our God." And, **"He will send from heaven and save me. God will send out His steadfast love and His faithfulness" (Ps 57:3).** The word "send" requires a direct object. Something must be sent. As Christians, we know what it is that God sent from heaven to save us. He sent His only-begotten Son, Jesus the Christ, the embodiment of His steadfast love and faithfulness. In Jesus' name, Amen.