



# Preparing for Death: Ash Wednesday

Athanasius Contra Mundum

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The Church gives us a most marvelous celebration with a most marvelous symbol, that of ash. Prior to the fall of man the meaning of this would have been far less significant, because God had bestowed upon Adam and Eve the gift of immortality, something they did not have by divine right, but by divine gift. When nature was disfigured through the fall, man lost this gift, and as such became subject to natural corruption, as God confirmed in His solemn admonition to them in Genesis which the Church repeats for us each Ash Wednesday: *Memento homo quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*.

Man was made from the mud, that is the dirt which had been moistened. Without water, the element which brings life, the dirt is little more than dust (*pulvis*). Dust is little different from ash, and often times in comparison they are made the same. When that which is not proper to corporeal matter, namely the soul, exits the body, the body returns to this form after death. Thus the Church gives us this most excellent symbol of the ultimate end of our earthly existence, which ties in perfectly with the season. The traditional law in practice, before this lax stage of the Church, required Catholics to fast each and every day of the Lenten season. There is a good and salutary reason for this, namely that in the moral tradition, it takes about 3 weeks to corrupt a vice, and 3 weeks to develop a virtue, which is 6 weeks, just short of the normal run of Lent. Thus the Church's traditional practice fulfills the natural law with respect to the virtue of fasting more perfectly than the current discipline of only fasting two days of the year. This should also be a sombre warning to Traditionalists, that if they are going to adopt the Church's perennial tradition, they also must adopt the traditional practice during Lent of daily fasting.

Fasting takes us away from the things we like in this world. The hunger we experience in denying ourselves food, leads us readily into other virtues by which we lose a love for created things. When we love the things of the world, we love things that cannot give us life, and as such we create attachments that lead us to sin and death. Those who go to hell get exactly what they deserve, because in choosing created things, they have chosen things that cannot give life, and as such they will not have it. They will have ash, which is all the things of the world really are, ash is the remnant of something which has had all life, all properties and minerals burned out of it, and what remains is nothing, just a speck of dust. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Aeschylus, in the lines from his play *Agamemnon* which lead this writing, encapsulate perfectly the endeavors of man without a redeemer. He writes that Ares (who is also the god of war) exchanges urns filled with ash for men, to be wept over by their loved ones, thus it is heavy dust because of the grief which it effects. In his beautiful Greek poetry he expresses a central truth, that the endeavors of men come to nothing, that an event so seemingly noble as the war on Troy should reduce stout men to mere ash.

It is thus that the Church opens up a season of fasting with the image of the ultimate parting of man from worldly goods, marked upon his forehead in the shape of the cross, a symbol of death as well as life, of the death that must be made first in this world to rejoice in life in the next. The mark of ash is a reminder to man that death is the end of all things, and what is left in this world is mere dust, while what we take with us, are the virtues of fasting and supernatural fortitude which we habituate our souls to by the activity of this season.

What's more, every man understands this, even the delusional. This is why so many who are normally absent on holy days of obligation, who sometimes don't show up every Sunday, will go to Ash Wednesday Mass. Non-Catholics will come to Ash Wednesday Masses in order to get ashes, not just because it is cool to do it (if it were they might do so at home), but also because at some level they understand that they are dust, and the symbol resonates with them although they don't know why. For us who do know why, how much more a sign these ashes are of our ultimate end, and what the pleasures of this life will bring us. Lastly, where do these ashes come from? They are burned from the Palm Branches with which we formerly bid our Lord entrance into Jerusalem (mystically at the Palm Sunday liturgy of the previous year), and these testaments to our unbelief, and betrayal marked in every sin are burned, because in the act of our Blessed Lord's redemption, our sins become just as all the things in this world... ash.

