

**The Spiritual Campaign  
Ash Wednesday  
March 6<sup>th</sup> 2019**

This year we are going to have two election campaigns in Canada, a provincial one in the Spring and a Federal campaign in October. We are fortunate to live in a country where every four years we are given the opportunity to consider who should govern us for the next four years, as leaders and their constituency nominees campaign for our vote.

There is another campaign that we as Catholic Christians participate in yearly. With this campaign there is no political posturing, no tweets vying for our attention, not need to go to the ballot box when the campaign season is over. This is a spiritual campaign that begins every Ash Wednesday and culminates in the Triduum Liturgy spanning three days, Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday with the first Mass of Easter in the Great Vigil.

When it comes to a political campaign much money is spent and thought given to how to allocate the resources in the four or five weeks leading up to the election. The Campaign Manager is one of the most important people on the team as he or she coordinates strategy and scheduling so that the party leader will be victorious and become the next Premier or Prime Minister

Likewise, when it comes to our Lenten Campaign – we want it to be thoughtful and purposeful so that when we get to the celebration of Easter, the greatest campaign victory of them all, we will have observed a Lent drawing ever closer in our relationship with the Risen Lord Jesus. The Prayer at the beginning of the Ash Wednesday Mass expresses the purpose of our Lenten Campaign this way:

*Grant, O Lord,  
that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service,  
so that, as we take up battle against spiritual evils,  
we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.*

This is a campaign of Christian service that has about it not so much the character of a political campaign but perhaps it would be better likened to a military campaign as we take up battle against spiritual evils.

Now think about this with me. When a team is gathered for a political campaign or an army for a military campaign you want to know the character of those contesting on your side and you want to know your opposition too.

The Imposition of ashes tells us something about those who are in this campaign with us. Those on our side. Ashes go right back to the beginning of Holy Scripture. In Genesis 3 we read the Lord speak these words to Adam after he and Eve had eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil:

***By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust.  
and to dust you shall return.”<sup>1</sup>***

This speaks so succinctly of our mortality. The years we have in this world amount to seventy, eighty or at the outside ninety. I just heard today the Alex Trebek, the decades long host of Jeopardy, has been diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. How ever present is our mortality as some of you can attest by grieving loved one's lost in the last twelve months or perhaps contending with your own illness.

Coupled with this theme of our mortality we read Job's words in the last chapter of the book bearing his name. Having been addressed by God in chapters 39-41 he declares:

***I repent in dust and ashes.”<sup>2</sup>***

For the Jewish people ashes were a sign of the recognition of sin in our lives, that just as ashes mark our foreheads with this grimy splotch, sin does the same to our souls.

There is a third association between ashes and the Old Testament that I want to mention comes in the Book of Esther. She was a beautiful Queen in the Court of the Persian King Ahasuerus – who had been manipulated by the maniacal court council, Haman to coordinate a Jewish Genocide. Although a Queen of the King, Esther is also Jewish and so we read in chapter 14:

***Esther the queen, seized with deathly anxiety, fled to the Lord. She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; and every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair. And she prayed to the Lord, the God of Israel...***

So, notice what Esther is doing. Esther herself is very beautiful, she's a queen, she ordinarily adorns herself in precious garments and beautiful jewels, but in this case, she takes off all those garments of joy and instead she puts on humbling clothes and she takes away her perfumes and she covers her head with ashes and dung. This is radical penance. Why? Because she's entering into an intense period of prayer for the salvation of her people. If she doesn't save them, they're all going to be massacred by the pagan king. Now, thankfully, the Church (in her wisdom) has only chosen the symbol of ashes for Ash Wednesday and for the season of Lent. I think that's

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<sup>1</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#). (1993). (Ge 3:19). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

<sup>2</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#). (1993). (Job 42:6). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

probably a good idea because “Dung Wednesday” probably wouldn’t be as popular as Ash Wednesday, so we’re thankful for that selective process in the Church’s tradition.

Notice now how the three Old Testament references to ashes relate to our Gospel reading for this evening.

The Discipline of prayer is the way we can place our mortality in the light of God’s good and loving immortality. The more we cultivate a life of prayer, be it cooperate as we are doing on this Ash Wednesday and whenever we attend Mass and public worship, or in our own personal life, as Jesus teaches in tonight’s reading, the deeper will be our confidence that because of Jesus these mortal bodies will one day put on immortality.

The Discipline of alms giving is a way for us to place our need for repentance within the larger context of thinking more of others, especially the neediest, before ourselves. Repentance does not just mean to be sorry of sin, but to think differently. When we sin, it is often because we are thinking of ourselves before others. When we purposefully give alms, we are thinking of others before ourselves.

The discipline of fasting is associated with Esther’s willingness to apply ashes and dung to herself. For fasting, be it from food or another pleasure that is good and right is a way for us to deepen our complete dependence upon God and to be converted in the virtue of humility.

For in this campaign when we know of our mortality and propensity to sin, we in turn know that the one leading this Campaign, Mother Church, calls us to a deeper trust and devotion. For our opponents in this campaign are spiritual evils that want to defeat us so that we mistrust or even deny Jesus while we carry through this earthly journey.

But when we take up afresh each year the weapons of self restraint through prayer, almsgiving and fasting, we can live this campaign of Christian service with a deepening love for and trust in our Lord Jesus Christ.

May your Lenten Campaign lead you through these five weeks to a wonderful celebration of Easter’s Victory, knowing ever more deeply in your heart, mind, soul and body that

Christ is risen!!!!

I wish you a Lent of deepening spiritual renewal as you grow in Christian service.