

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle
St. Anthony of Padua Parish, Effingham, Illinois
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Ash Wednesday

"In the heart of every man, begging for love, there is a thirst for love."¹ Is that not why each of us has come today? Have we not come because we know that we are each in need of love and we sense, somehow, that the love we seek can only be found here, at the altar of the Lord?

Love is the origin of our existence and the goal of our lives. Without love, we are nothing and our lives are meaningless (cf. I Corinthians 13:2-3).

This yearning, this thirst, for love that each of us experiences, how did we come to have it?

We know that the Lord God created each of us from the "clay of the ground" (Genesis 2:7). Carefully did he mold us with the gentle and attentive hands of a potter, and he "blew into [our] nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7).

He breathed his life and love into us, calling us to his friendship, but it did not take us long to lose this friendship. Yet this friendship with God was not lost because of anything that he did, but because of our rejection of his love.

Because we have rejected God's love, his friendship, there is in each of our hearts a deep thirst for love that, try as we

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 29 March 2007.

might, cannot be fully satisfied this side of heaven. Knowing of our thirst and desiring to satisfy it, Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

The water that he gives is the water of his love; it is this water for which our hearts are thirsting and for which we were created. It is this love that we so often reject.

The ashes that will soon be imposed on our foreheads serve to remind us of two fundamental aspects of the Christian life.

First, they serve to remind us that the Lord fashioned us from dust of the earth. In this way the ashes become a sign of the love of God because he formed us in love and for love. They remind us that we are called to God's friendship.

Second, the ashes remind us "that you are dust and to dust you shall return." In this way they remind us not only of the beginning of our lives but also of the end of our lives. They call us to repentance, for our life may be snatched away from us at any moment and we must repent while we still have time.

In the greatness of his love, the Lord God calls to us through his prophet Joel: "Even now ... return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning" (Joel 2:12).

Today, the trumpet has blown in Zion (cf. Joel 2:15). Holy Mother Church has proclaimed a fast, a time for us to give greater attention to the reality of our sin and a time to seek anew the mercy of God, to enter again into his friendship. In short, she says to us in the name of Christ, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2)!

The Lord God gives us this penitential season because "gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment" (Joel 2:13).

So merciful is he that the Apostle Paul rightly proclaims, "now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (II Corinthians 6:2).

For this reason we come to the Lord, fully acknowledging, "Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:6).

As we do so we must heed the Savior's warning, "do not be like the hypocrites" (Matthew 6:5). Far too many will have come here today seeking to receive the outward sign of repentance - the ashes - without desiring to be moved to a sincere conversion to God within.

If we receive these ashes without a sincere desire to be restored to friendship with God, to live as his friends, faithful to his teachings and abiding in his love, then we

receive these ashes in vain and we mock the love that he lavishes upon us.

Therefore, "we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain" (II Corinthians 5:) but to "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel!" "Be reconciled to God" (II Corinthians 5:)!

In this Sesquicentennial Year, the Lord has given us a profound year of grace and a time to renew our friendship with him, following the example of our holy patron, Saint Anthony of Padua.

This Lenten season, let us implore the Lord's mercy, with Saint Anthony as our model and guide, that he might renew the dust from which we are made and breathe his life into us again. With our patron, let us pray:

O Lord Jesus, make us, we pray, that good earth which is able to receive the word of your grace and to bear fruit, fruit worthy of repentance. So may we be found worthy to live eternally in your glory, in your presence; you who are blessed for ever and ever. Amen.²

² Saint Anthony of Padua, Homily for Sexagesima, 12.