

I want to begin by recognizing the attendance at the Ash Wednesday Masses. The 8:30 am was full, the noon was pretty full, and the 7pm was standing room only. I was impressed; indeed, a little overwhelmed to see so many people. It was an amazing feeling to be in a crowded church. I told those people at 7pm that when we were consulting with the acoustical engineers about the echo, the ultimate fix they proposed, believe it or not, was not to carpet the space, but was to pad the pews, or, fill the pews with people – whichever is easiest. So, I told the people, if you want to hear better and reduce the echo, let's pack the church every Mass.

There is a kind of crass saying in the church that the reason why the attendance at Ash Wednesday services is always so high is because the Church gives something away. Palm Sunday is another day like that, although not as popular as Ash Wednesday. The high attendance is indeed an interesting phenomenon, especially considering that Ash Wednesday is not a holy day of obligation; it isn't even a feast day, like the saints have. So, maybe, to some extent there is some truth in that saying; people want to receive the ashes, but it goes deeper than just getting something, especially since the something that they get fades away, or is washed off at the end of the day. Ash Wednesday is a tradition that many people hold close, perhaps because there is a feeling that if we don't get the ashes, we'll have a bad Lent. So, it's right to say we need to receive something, not a magic talisman, but a tangible connection to a community on a journey together, which refocuses us. And we need this refocusing throughout our lives, since too often in life we lose ourselves in trying to accumulate more and more things, whether they be material things or immaterial ones, like praise. The ashes are a reminder that these other things aren't as important as make them out to be, because ultimately, we are dust, and where we are headed, we can't take any of them with us.

I believe that getting ashes is helpful also because Lent is a season of losses, or to use a more theological word, sacrifices. We willingly let go of certain things as a way to prepare us for that ultimate departure we all have to make at the end of our lives. And so, in order to make it a little easier to let go of something that is of value to us, the church gives us something. And it makes sense, because this was the case for Jesus. Before he went into the desert for 40 days, he got something to help him. And what was that?

In the Gospel we just heard, Luke tells us that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. Having just been baptized in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus. But that wasn't the only thing he received. In that same moment as the Holy Spirit descended, the voice of the Father from heaven proclaimed Jesus to be beloved, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). In that moment, Jesus was given an identity. He was marked, consecrated as the beloved son, and for Jesus, this "possession" was all he needed; as Luke tells us, he was filled, not with food, not with power, not with money, but with the knowledge of who he was. He was beloved by the Father, the Father had given him everything, and so, the only natural response was to leave everything else behind.

He was filled. That's why we read that incredible detail that for 40 days Jesus ate nothing; He had everything he needed. And this is something we hear about Jesus in other places in the Gospels. In the account of the woman at the well in John's Gospel, the apostles go off to buy food after a long journey and find Jesus conversing with the woman. After she departs, they try to offer this food to Jesus, to which Jesus responds, "I have food to eat of which you do not know...My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work."

I hope this is what we are intuit when they come for their ashes. That we see this time of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting to be a time **not** about "giving things up," but about remembering what we have been given, an identity, given to us, like Jesus, at our own baptism. At our own

baptism, we were anointed with oil as a sign of the Holy Spirit that was given to us. In our baptism, the father spoke to us, saying as he said to Jesus, “you are my beloved, I send you to do my will.” The tough question we must ask ourselves is, is this enough for me? Is God enough for me?

We live in a place where so much is made available to us so easily. Fr. Sunil told me a funny story about how one of the Salesian superiors from Italy came to visit his community in South Sudan around the time of Lent. The superior tried to enter into a conversation with them by asking what they would be giving up; fruit, ice cream, beer. Fr. Sunil burst into laughter as he told me the response of the missionaries; it would be nice to have any of those things at all during the year. The superior was a little embarrassed. We take these things for granted, these comforts, which are so readily available. And being so available, and so present in our lives, they can often blind us to what we have that is truly important: God and the identity he has given to us.

Is God enough? As the Father was enough for Jesus, Lent forces us to ask this, is God enough for me, or do I need more? The devil tempted Jesus with this question. “Put God to the test; will he save you? Will he be enough for you?” And what did Jesus answer, “You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.” Luke tells us that the devil departed from him for a time, because he would return again during Jesus’ passion, when Jesus was on the cross, when the temptation would be not to throw himself off of the temple, but to take himself down. Luke tells us, “The people stood by and watched; the rulers, meanwhile, sneered at him and said, “He saved others, let him save himself if he is the chosen one, the Messiah of God” (Luke 23:35). Was God enough for Jesus in that moment? How did Jesus answer? During His agony in the Garden, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will” (Mt 26:39). And from the cross, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Jesus now offers back His Spirit as a gift of love to the one who so generously gave it in the first place, the same Spirit that had filled him, sustained him, and led him to this moment, the completion of his mission.

Is God enough for us? Such a tough question. I have been confronted by this question many times in my life, especially when it comes time to sacrifice certain things and the temptation sets in to think that if this thing or that thing is taken from us me then I will somehow be deprived. In those moments, the question comes, “Mario, aren’t I enough for you?” Sometimes the answer isn’t said with as much grace as Jesus. Sometimes it is said with a scream, with a cry. Yes, Lord, you are enough for me.

And this doesn’t just apply to material things that we give up during Lent, chocolate, alcohol, tv; this applies to the big moments in life. When we lose jobs; loved ones, marriages, friendships, reputation. In these difficult moments, food can’t help us, being in power cannot either? One thing and one thing alone will help us: God.

“Am I enough for you?” God asks. Jesus went into the desert to respond to this question. Lent is our time to follow him there, and like Jesus, we will be tempted. The ashes that we put on our heads a few days ago mark the beginning of our response. I am filled with your spirit, Lord. So, yes, you are enough for me. You are everything.