

Ash Wednesday: The Thought of Death

Summary of the Morrow's Meditation

We will consider tomorrow that the ceremony of the ashes invites us to sanctify Lent: first, by penance and mortification; second, by the thought of death. We will then make the resolution: first, cheerfully to embrace all the mortifications suitable to this holy season, fasting and abstinence, with all the crosses sent by Providence which we may encounter; second, to excite ourselves to do all these things well by means of the saying of St Bernard: "*If you were destined to die today would you do this or that?*"

Meditation for the Morning

Let us adore the Spirit of God inspiring the Church to institute the ceremony of the ashes in order to teach us what are the pious dispositions in which we ought to pass the holy season of Lent. Let us thank Him for this excellent institution, and let us beg Him to enable us to understand it aright and to put it into practice.

THE CEREMONY OF THE ASHES PREACHES TO HIS PENANCE AND MORTIFICATION

From the most ancient times ashes placed upon the head have been an emblem of penance and sorrow. Job, when he repented that he had pleaded the cause of his innocence in too unmeasured language, cries out: "*Therefore I reprobend myself and do penance in dust and ashes*" (Job XLII:6). As a penance for the sacrilegious theft committed by Achan at the taking of Jericho, Joshua and the ancients of Israel covered their heads with ashes (Jos. VII:6). Later on Judith, Esther, Mardochai, Judas Machabeus employed these means for turning away the anger of heaven; Jeremiah and all the prophets counselled this practice to the Jews who were stricken by God (Jer. XXV:34). Lastly, Our Lord Himself speaks of ashes as the symbol of penance, when He says of the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon that if they had seen the miracles which had been worked by Him in the midst of Judea, they would have done penance in sackcloth and ashes (Matt. XI:21). This it is which explains why the primitive Church distinguished by means of ashes penitents from the faithful; and on the first day of Lent she covered with ashes the heads of all her children without distinction, for this reason, says Tertullian, that every Christian is born to live in penance. The ceremony of the ashes is therefore as a seal which binds us to penance, in such a manner that to receive ashes on our head without having contrition in our heart is to simulate a feeling which we do not possess: it is hypocrisy. Let us enter heartily into the spirit of penance from the first day of this holy season. The interest of our salvation requires it; Jesus Christ explicitly declares so by His words: "*Except you do penance you shall all perish*" (Luke XIII:5), and He teaches it still better by His example; the whole of His life was nothing more than a continual penance. All the saints, imitating Him, have performed penance, and what right have we to dispense ourselves from it? We have sinned many times, and all sin, even when remitted, demands penance. We have passions to conquer, temptations to combat, and penance is the surest preservative against both the one and the other. Let us here question our conscience: have we the spirit of penance suitable to the holy season of Lent?

THE CEREMONY OF THE ASHES RECALLS TO US THE THOUGHT OF DEATH

“*O man*” the Church says to us today, “*remember that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return*”. The Christian, therefore, who comes to listen to these words at the foot of the altar presents himself there as a victim who, submissive to the sentence pronounced upon him, comes to offer himself to be, when it shall so please the Sovereign Arbitrator of life and death, reduced to ashes and sacrificed to His glory. By this act he seems to say to God: Lord, I come to accomplish in spirit that which Thou wilt soon finish in deed. Thou hast resolved, in punishment of my sin, to reduce me on some coming day into ashes. I come myself to make the essay today. I fore stall the decree of Thy justice, and I already execute it. The Church in making us begin the holy season of Lent by this solemn acceptance of death, by the great sacrifice of all that we have and of all that we are, gives us to understand that she looks upon the thought of death as the most suitable one to make us pass through Lent in a holy manner, that is to say, in flying from sin and in the practice of penance and of all the virtues. Who indeed can think seriously of death and not keep himself always in a state of readiness to appear before God, and not watch over his words and actions, and not mortify himself in order to expiate his past faults and satisfy divine justice, and not multiply his good works and increase his merits (Gal. VI:10), and not detach himself from everything which will last for so short a time, and not repeat with St Bernard, If I were to die after this confession, how should I perform it; after this communion, how should I dispose myself for it; after this conversation, how should I speak; at the end of this week, of this month, how should I spend the time? Let us beg of God to enable us rightly to understand this great lesson of death, and to make us deduce from it practical consequences suitable to the sanctification of Lent.

Resolutions and spiritual nosegay as above.