

Thursday after Ash Wednesday: The Ashes a Lesson of Humility

Summary of the Morrow's Meditation

We will meditate tomorrow: first, on the lesson of humility which the Church gives us in the ceremony of the ashes; second, the reasons why the Church gives us this lesson at the beginning of Lent. We will then make the resolution: first, to keep ourselves, during the whole of Lent, in a humble and contrite spirit, whilst beholding our nothingness and our sins; second, heartily to accept the penance of Lent, as being far less than we deserve. Our spiritual nosegay shall be the words of the Church: "*Dust thou art, and into dust shall thou return*" (Gen. III:19).

Meditation for the Morning

Let us adore the Spirit of God inspiring the Church to institute the ceremony of the ashes, as being a powerful lesson of humility for all Christians. Let us thank Him for this holy inspiration, and let us ask of Him grace abundantly to profit by it.

THE LESSON OF HUMILITY WHICH THE CHURCH GIVES US BY THE CEREMONY OF THE ASHES

If the Church places upon the head, which is the seat of pride, the ashes which are the symbol of the nothingness of human things, it is not only to preach to us thereby thoughts of penance and of death; it is also and above all for the purpose of saying to us: Do not inflate yourself so much, proud man. Remember that you are dust and ashes and that to dust you will return (Gen. III:19). Dust and ashes, behold whence thou comest; such is thy origin. God took a little clay, and of it formed the first man, whence have come all other men. Dust and ashes, behold what you are: a little clay formed into a man, says Tertullian. Now, is it suitable for clay to boast of what it is, to lift up itself through pride against Him who, animating it with His spirit, raised it through mercy above what it was? (Sirach x:9) Dust and ashes, behold what you will soon become, for you will return to dust (Gen. III:19). You will return thereto with the sensitiveness which takes offence, with thoughts of self-love and of complaisance in yourselves, with the desire to attract notice and be honoured. All that at a certain day will disappear, and be nothing but a handful of ashes, will be lost in ashes, and vanish like ashes before the wind, after having been vile like it, sterile and useless like it. Even if you had equalled and surpassed in glory the most renowned men, in riches the most opulent of men, in enjoyments the men who have had the most enjoyments: all that, at the end, will be reduced to a few ashes; and these few ashes, it will not be possible to recognise; it will not be known to whom they belong; a blast of wind will disperse them in the air, and the very name of him from whom they come will be as entirely forgotten as though he had never existed. What a lesson of humility, well calculated to disabuse us of all the delusions of self-love, and to make us return to the humble sentiments we ought to have of ourselves! What folly to desire to be esteemed and honoured, since we shall finally be reduced to a few ashes!

WHY THE CHURCH GIVES US THIS LESSON AT THE BEGINNING OF LENT

It is, first, because, without humility, all the mortifications of Lent would be devoid of merit. The Pharisees fast, said Jesus Christ in the gospel of yesterday; but as they do it in order to obtain the esteem of men, they do it without any merit, and receive their recompense upon earth. The reason is, because to esteem ourselves is to transgress against the truth, which tells us that we are nothing; and because to desire to be esteemed is to transgress against justice, which exclaims to us: To God alone be honour and glory (I Tim. 1:17), to us, confusion (Baruch 1:15). Now, lies and injustice are incompatible with merit. It is, second, because without humility there is no true penance. True penance has for its basis the feeling of our misery, or the humiliation of the soul, which, confessing itself to be guilty, recognises itself to be bound to make all sorts of reparations and satisfactions to divine justice. He who esteems himself may, like the Pharisee, perform exterior acts of penance, and say, like him: "I fast twice in the week; I pay the tax on all my goods;" but, at bottom, this penance cannot please Him who sounds hearts, and who takes delight only in truth. The Pharisee, notwithstanding his fasts, was nonetheless held in execration by God, for the sole reason that he esteemed himself and sought for the esteem and praise of others. Let us fear lest it may be so with us; and in order to prevent this misfortune, let us begin Lent in a spirit of humility.

Resolutions and spiritual nosegay as above.