

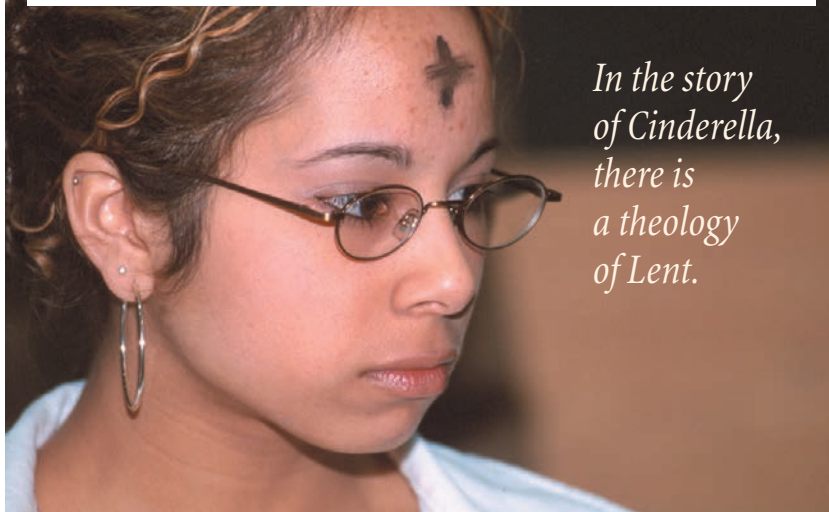
Lent—A Season to Sit in the Ashes

We begin the season of Lent with ashes on our foreheads. What is symbolized by this smudging? Perhaps the heart understands better than the head because more people go to church on Ash Wednesday than on any other day of the year, including Christmas. Why are the ashes so popular?

Their popularity, I suspect, comes from the fact that, as a symbol, they are blunt, archetypal and speak the language of the soul. Something inside each of us knows exactly why we take the ashes: “Dust thou art and into dust thou shalt return!” No doctor of metaphysics need explain this.

To put on ashes, to sit in ashes, is to say publicly and to yourself that you are reflective, in a penitential mode, that this is not “ordinary time” for you, that you are grieving some of the things you have done

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W.P. MITTAN

ASH WEDNESDAY

or lost, that some important work is going on silently inside you. You are, metaphorically and really, in the cinders of a dead fire, waiting for a fuller day in your life.

All of this has deep roots. There is something innate to the human soul that knows that, every so often, one must make a journey of descent, be smudged, lose one's luster, and wait while the ashes do their work. All ancient traditions abound with stories of having to sit in the ashes before one can be transformed.

We all know, for example, the story of Cinderella. This is a centuries-old, wisdom-tale that speaks about the value of ashes. The name, Cinderella, itself already says most of it. Literally it means: "the young girl who sits in the cinders." Moreover, as the tale makes plain, before the glass slipper is placed on her foot, before the beautiful gown, ball, dance, and marriage, there must first be a period of being humbled. In the story of Cinderella, there is a theology of Lent.

The Church taps into this deep well of wisdom when it puts ashes on our foreheads at the beginning of Lent. Lent is a season for each of us to sit in the ashes, waiting while some silent growth takes place within us, and simply being still so that the ashes can do their work in us.

The Desert as a Place of Preparation



“Every tear brings the messiah closer!” This was a refrain in Jewish apocalyptic literature and expressed the belief that a certain quota of tears had first to be shed before any true joy could inhabit us. They understood this mystically, not literally. In order to be filled by God one must first be emptied.

The desert does this for you. It empties you. It is not a place where you can decide how you want to grow and change. But it is an experience that you undergo, expose yourself to and have the courage to face. The idea is not so much that you do things there, but that things happen to you while there—silent, unseen, transforming things. The desert purifies you, almost against your will, through God’s efforts.

In the desert, what really occurs is a cosmic confrontation between God and the devil; though this happens within and through you. Your job is only to have the courage to be there. The idea is that God does the work, providing you have the courage to show up.

In terms of an image, this is what Lent is meant to be, time in the desert to courageously face the chaos and the demons within us and to let God do battle with them through us. The result is that we are purified, made ready, so the intoxicating joy of Easter might then bind us more closely to God and each other.

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Facing Our Demons in the Desert



We live lives of tortured complexity. Inside each of us there is both a saint and a sinner and enough complexity to write our own book on abnormal psychology. Our hearts are a murky cauldron of grace and sin, angels and demons. Always, it seems, we are torn in a way that leaves us feeling unsure, guilty, and tense.

To go into the desert means to stare our inner chaos in the face. What demons live inside this chaos? The demons of the prodigal son, grandiosity and unbridled sexuality; and the demons of his older brother, paranoia and joylessness.

Grandiosity is the demon that tells us that we are the center of the universe, that our lives are more important than those of others. Unbridled sexuality is the demon of obsession, addiction, and lust. Its urge is to bracket everything else—sacred commitment, moral ideal, and personal consequences—for a single, furtive pleasure.

Paranoia is the demon of bitterness, anger, and jealousy. It makes us believe that life has cheated us, that the celebration is always about others and never about us. This demon fills us with the urge to be cynical, cold, distrustful, and cursing. Finally, the last demon in this family tells us that joylessness is maturity, that cynicism is wisdom, and that bitterness is justice. This is the demon that keeps us from entering the room of celebration and joining the dance.

All of these demons are inside every one of us. To stare them in the face is to enter the desert. A scary thing? Yes, but the Scriptures assure us that if we muster the courage to face them, God will send angels to minister to us.

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Acknowledge Your Own Complexity



I once saw an interview with Catherine de Hueck Doherty, a Russian baroness and the founder of the Madonna House Apostolate. She was already more than 80 years old and, reflecting on the struggles of her spiritual journey, said something to this effect:

“It’s like there are three persons inside me. There’s someone I call the baroness. The baroness is spiritual and given over to asceticism and prayer. She’s the one who founded the religious community, wrote the spiritual books, and who tries to give her life to the poor. But inside of me too there’s another person whom I call Catherine. Catherine likes idleness, long baths, fine clothes, putting on make-up, good meals, good wine, and as a married woman enjoyed a healthy sex life. She doesn’t want renunciation or poverty. She’s not religious like the baroness. Indeed, she hates the baroness and has a strained relationship with her.

“And, finally, inside of me too, there’s someone else, a little girl, a child lying on a hillside in Finland, watching the clouds and daydreaming. And, as I get older, I feel more like the baroness, long more for Catherine, but think that maybe the little girl daydreaming on a hillside in Finland might be who I really am.”

These words come from a spiritual giant, someone who attained both wholeness and sanctity after a long search and difficult struggle. Like Catherine Doherty, all of us have a number of different persons inside us. Wholeness means somehow making a whole, a harmony, out of all these different persons.

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Listening to Christ's Heartbeat

The Last Supper account in John's gospel contains a curious picture. The evangelist describes the beloved disciple as reclining

on the breast of Jesus. What is contained in his image? A picture of how each of us should be focused as we look out at the world.

When you put your head upon the breast of another, your ear is just above that person's heart and you are able to hear his or her heartbeat. Thus, in John's image, we see the beloved disciple with his ear on Jesus' heart and his eyes peering out at the world.

This is an image, a mystical one. Among other things, it is a picture of gentleness. What it shows, however, is not a saccharine piety, a sweetness hard to swallow, but a softness that comes from being at peace, from being so rooted and centered in a love that one can look out at the world without bitterness, anger, jealousy, the sense of being cheated, and the need to blame or compete with others.

In John's gospel, it is also a eucharistic image. What we see there, the image of a person with his ear on Jesus' heart, is how John wants us to imagine ourselves when we are at Eucharist. In its reality, that is what the Eucharist is, a physical reclining on the breast of Jesus. It is also an image of how we should touch God and be sustained by him in solitude.



COPIES

Lent is that annual journey taking us into the depths of God's mystery. For many who must juggle life's daily demands, the season often seems to pass by quickly with little opportunity for spiritual growth. But in this booklet, renowned spiritual writer Father Ron Rolheiser provides reflections for each day of Lent and Easter week that are short and clear enough for the busy person, yet provocative, and challenging to the heart of one's being.

Begin each *Daybreaks* meditation by finding a quiet place where you can be calm and peace-filled in the presence of God—at least for a few moments. These reflections will not take long. You need only enough time to let these written words sink in and inspire your own thoughts. How will you apply them to your own life? Do they spur you on to make some specific type of change in your life, your attitudes, or your behavior? That is the process of conversion. That is the journey of Lent and Easter.

Father Ron Rolheiser is the president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He is an internationally recognized speaker, retreat director, and author. Father Rolheiser's weekly column is featured in more than 30 newspapers in five different countries, and he is author of the best-selling books *The Shattered Lantern* and *The Holy Longing*.

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