Repent and Believe in the Gospel:
Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi in the Ash Wednesday Liturgy

Anthony John Javier, SSP

Introduction

In the Catholic Church, we have a very old maxim: "...*Lex orandi, lex credendi*." Literally translated, it means, "the law of prayer is the law of belief." Coined by *Prosper of Aquitaine*, this axiom has become one of the tenets of liturgical theology and expresses how the liturgy of the Catholic Church is very coherent with its words and actions and consistent with its teachings and decrees.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that liturgy is a "privileged place" for catechesis (CCC 1074). Therefore, the goal of liturgy is to lead the faithful in understanding the core faith values behind the words and gestures within the liturgy: its theology and spirituality. Consequently, in achieving this goal, the faithful are then edified to live 'in Christ' and perfect charity. Indeed, prayer and worship are the articulation of our faith. Meaning to say, we pray and live what we believe, just as the complete version of the maxim quoted above tells us, "*Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*." We pray, so we believe, so we live.

In this regard, we can say that the words used in the liturgy are precisely knitted to have a cohesive relationship between the prayers and actions, the form and matter in the liturgy. Every word and every action in the liturgy have a

corresponding meaning and purpose. The Church's teachings (*lex credendi*) are articulated and made manifest in the celebration of the liturgy through prayers and rites (*lex orandi*).[1] In praying, we are also being taught and in learning these, we are compelled to live what we learned and what we believe.

This paper explores the imposition of ashes in the Ash Wednesday liturgy and reflects on its meaning for our faith. Aside from exploring the ritual gesture itself, it will also analyze the accompanying formula and the theology it contains.

Biblical Roots of Imposition of Ashes during Ash Wednesday

The use of ashes has already been present since the Old Testament times. In the Bible, ashes symbolize mourning, repentance, mortality, and penance.

Ashes of Mourning

In the Book of Esther, ashes were used by Mordecai to signify that he was mourning upon hearing the decree of Haman of Persia, mandating the murder of all of the Jewish people in his empire. "*When Mordecai learned all that was happening, he tore his garments, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city crying out loudly and bitterly.*"[2] Later on, in the same account, all the Jews "*went into deep mourning, with fasting, weeping, and lament; most of them lay on sackcloth and ashes.*"[3] The same explanation is seen in the Book of Judith from which we can also identify a biblical basis for the custom of placing ashes on the head as a symbol

1 *See* Kevin Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994).

2 Esther 4:1 (New American Bible Revised Edition)

3 Esther 4:3 (NAB Revised Edition)

of mourning.[4] In the Book of Daniel, ashes were also used to signify the same intention. When Daniel read the prophecy of Jeremiah that for seventy years Jerusalem should lie in ruins, he prayed to the Lord "*with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes*.[5]

In the biblical narratives cited above, we can infer that the gesture of the imposition of the ashes on the head or all over the body is also a metaphor for "humiliating oneself,"[6] a very crucial characteristic of repenting. This disposition is an expression of a strong sense that one has done wrong. In the texts presented, the use of ashes is to humble oneself before the eyes of God, that God may have mercy on them, save them from their misery, and forgive them from all their sins.

Ashes of Repentance

In the book of Job, written between the 7th and 5th century B.C., the gesture of covering the body with ashes symbolizes a repentant heart. In the part of the narrative where Job surrenders himself to God's will and humbles himself before God, he says, "*I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.*"[7] In the same way, the prophet Jonah who preached repentance and conversion of heart to the town of Nineveh, encouraged the entire town and the king to cover themselves with ashes and sit in ashes to please God to spare them with mercy and not carry out his divine wrath to the town. "*The people of Nineveh believed in God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth. [And] when the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his*

4 Judith 9:1 (NAB Revised Edition)

5 Daniel 9:3 (New International Version)

6 Jastrow, Morris, "Dust, Earth, and Ashes as Symbols of Mourning among the Ancient Hebrews." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 20 (1899): 135. doi:10.2307/592320 (Accessed March 30, 2021).

7 Job 42:6 (NAB Revised Edition).

throne, laid his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes."[8]

The representation of ashes, as understood above, strongly suggests that the use of ashes was once connected with the idea of purification and that the placing of ashes on the head has an expiatory significance.[9]

Ashes of Mortality

There are few references, indeed, in the Bible where we can identify that ashes were used to symbolize mortality. However, it was already a common understanding in the Bible that man, after his death, will succumb to ashes. As stated in the Book of Genesis, man was *formed out of clay.*[10] Other translations of this text use *dirt, ground, or dust* which relatively also means ashes. Without life, man returns to ashes (Genesis 2:7), "*by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust, you shall return*."[11]

This is what most scholars believed to be the meaning of the obscure gesture of Job in "sprinkling the ashes into the air over their heads."[12] The gesture symbolizes mortality. Some scholars explained that the said gesture, metaphorically and symbolically, reenacts burial rituals where 'the earth would be thrown over the dead body or into the grave.'[13]

8 Jonah 3:5-6 (NAB Revised Edition).
9 Jastrow, "Dust, Earth, and Ashes."
10 Genesis 2:7 (NAB Revised Edition).
11 Genesis 3:19 (NAB Revised Edition).
12 Job 2:12 (NAN Revised Edition).
13 Jastrow, "Dust, Earth, and Ashes."

Ashes of Penance

Penance and Repentance are closely related to each other. Penance, by definition, is an act done personally as an expression of apology, regret, and guilt brought about by sin. Hence, penance is an expression of repentance. Even Jesus made some reference to ashes as an act of penance. In the New Testament, Jesus said that if the mighty works he had performed among his contemporaries were performed in the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon, the pagans would have long shown reparation, "*... in sackcloth and ashes*." [14]

Therefore it also goes without saying that penance is present in all gestures of remorse, mourning, and repentance. Consequently, penance constitutes a change of heart. The use of ashes in the bible and the liturgy signifies one's admittance of sin and reliance on the mercy of God.

Ashes: Signs of Death and Life, Sorrow and Joy

Following this line of thinking allows us to understand some truths about our faith and life as mere human beings. In the same manner, we are led to other realizations on how to live our lives as a person, as a human being, and as a Christian. The ashes which we use in the liturgy during Ash Wednesday tell us our own story, the story of the relationship of God and his people.

Recently, in this time of the pandemic, where millions of lives have already been taken by CoViD-19, I saw a post on my personal social media account. In that post, my friend, who recently lost a relative to CoViD-19, asked God: "*Many good people are dying, and many young people are gone too soon. Is this the will of God for them?*" It is even more striking and grieving when read in its original Filipino rendition,

14 Matthew 11:21 (NAB Revised Edition).

"Maraming mababuting tao na ang kinuha, maraming na ring bata ang tinanggalan ng pagkakataong mabuhay ng matagumpay at masaya… Ito ba ang gusto ng Panginoon para sa kanila?"

This post honestly hit me too hard that I, too, began to ask the same question. But, upon reflecting on it, I realize that what made the statement negative is my mindset. God never wishes us death. He, rather, desires to be with us. And so, I replied to my friend's post. *"God does not desire death, he desires eternal life for us. Your relative may not be with us anymore, but I am sure that God is holding him ever in the palm of his hand. What we can do now is to live on for that loved one we have lost, that we may share the eternal life he first received, in God's time."* Thinking about it more deeply, this is also the message of the ashes which we impose on our heads during the Ash Wednesday liturgy. The simultaneously 'disturbing and consoling communal action'[15] during the rite frightens us because of the idea of the inevitability of death but, at the same time, consoles us with the idea of eternal life.

The ashes in the Ash Wednesday liturgy remind us that our lives were only given to us and that God is our ultimate end and destiny. It is indeed consoling that the adversities of this passing world will come to an end and, through the mercy of God, we will get to share God's divine life, having to live without the agony of pain, hardship, and sin.

And so, in the same way, we are also reminded that our call in this earthly life is to turn away from sin and to believe in the Good News of our salvation in Jesus. Truly, the imposition of ashes on our forehead is a joyful reminder of our purpose as Christians and as God's created beings.

15 Martin Connell, *Ash Wednesday: Meaning and History. In Journal of the Liturgical Conference,* vol. 15, no. 1. Taylor & Francis Group, 1998. 9

The Formula for the Imposition of Ashes

In the Liturgy of the Ash Wednesday, two alternative formulas are provided for the imposition of the ashes: "***Remember that you are dust, and to dust, you shall return"*** and ***"Repent, and believe in the Gospel."***

From dust and unto dust, you shall return. With reference to the book of Genesis, we can understand the natural design of human life, '*By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground since from it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust, you will return."* The Liturgy reminds us that our last day is coming and that our bodies will, sooner or later, return to the dust of the earth for a time after death.[16] In the same way, this formula reminds us that there is nothing we can boast of to ourselves, to others, and especially to God. Thus, what is asked of us is to live a life of humility with compassion for others that we may have eternal life and share the eternal banquet of God.

This idea is supported by the prayer which the presiding priest utters during the blessing of the ashes, before the imposition:

> O God, who are moved by acts of humility and respond with forgiveness to works of penance, lend your merciful ear to our prayers and in your kindness pour out the grace of your blessing on your servants who are marked with these ashes, that as they follow the Lenten observance they may be worthy to come with minds made pure to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of your Son through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Repent and believe in the Gospel. Just as in the old times, ashes are used to signify repentance. 'This formula

16 Martin Connell, *Ash Wednesday: Meaning and History*. 9

emphasizes our penance, our fasting, that this gains favor with God.'[17] It is notable that in this formula, there is no mention of dust which pertains to the frailty of human nature. There is also no mention of the implication of death. Instead, the word used is "repentance" or the admittance that we are mere creatures bound to die and ever at the mercy of God. Repentance is the admittance that we sin and should ask for forgiveness from the merciful and compassionate Father. Above all, repentance is the way to salvation. Repentance is *metanoia*, a change of heart.

This idea is also supported by the prayer which the presiding priest utters during the blessing of the ashes before its imposition. Thus, ***lex orandi, lex credendi***.

> O God who desire not the death of sinners, but their conversion, mercifully hear our prayers and in your kindness be pleased to bless these ashes, which we intend to receive upon our heads, that we, who acknowledge we are but ashes and shall return to dust, may, through a steadfast observance of lent, gain pardon for sins and newness of life after the likeness of your Risen Son. Who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Conclusion

So many times, we have heard the phrase, 'action speaks louder than words.' This is true on so many levels, especially when we speak of how our actions should cohere with the words that come out from our lips. The same with 'practice what you preach.' Human as we are, we reject the inconsistent and tend to admire the consistent; in politics, in society, in

17 Kevin M. Tierney and Jacob Michael, "The Disciple of Lent: A Comparison of the Proper of the Traditional Latin Mass and the *Novus Ordo*," In *Daily Catholic,* vol 15, no. 67, 4. http://dailycatholic.org/issue/04Mar/mar7lex.htm.

morals, and in the liturgy. Oftentimes coherence is where beauty and truth reside.

This is probably one of the reasons why the Liturgy of the Church is so consistent because the Church is cognizant that its rituals, practices, sacraments, liturgy have to be pleasing to the eyes, edifying to the heart, and appealing to the mind. In this way, the truth of the Gospel would be efficiently handed on from one generation to another: systematically, thoroughly, and consistently.

In the Ash Wednesday liturgy, both the rites and prayers consistently remind us to be mindful of our mortal nature and return to God, especially in the season of Lent. In a sense, they remind us to be consistent ourselves so that our lives become coherent with our worship.

BACCALAUREATE IN SACRED THEOLOGY

SYNTHESIS PAPERS



https://publications.lst.edu/