

**Ash Wednesday**  
**Cycle B**  
**Saint Margaret Parish, Bel Air**  
**February 22, 2012**

**A Contradiction?**

Jesus says in today's gospel: *"When you fast, wash your face so that you may not appear to others to be fasting."*

We hear this, and then we proceed to place ashes on our foreheads. Then we walk out of church to our jobs or schools or stores with these ashes.

So why do we do this? Is all of this just one big contradiction?

**Community Conversion**

I think not and here is why I say that.

So often, we tend to think of Lent as a time of individual conversion. But, in truth, Lent is also a time for social or community conversion.

The idea is that we are all being called to conversion and renewal. We are to do this together, as a community or as God's People on this earth.

And beyond that, the repentance that we are called to do has a community dimension to it. We are all called to personal growth and to deeper conversion in our one-on-one relationship with the Lord.

But Lent also calls us to grow in our relationships with others and our sense of responsibility for the well-being of all God's people on this earth. So, Lenten repentance is to have both personal and social or community dimensions to it.

This is why the ashes are placed on our foreheads – much as we were anointed with chrism at baptism and again at confirmation. Those anointings make us one with Christ and also one with the living body of Christ, God's people on this earth.

In the same way, the ashes remind us that we need to repent of things in our relationship with the Lord and in our other relationships also. This is why having the ashes on our foreheads is not contradicting the gospel.

**Ways to Grow During Lent**

Now, with this understanding, we can better appreciate the three Lenten practices that Jesus mentions today: 1) prayer, 2) fasting, and 3) charitable giving.

So, for prayer: We might participate in Mass one weekday morning in addition to Sunday, or we might pray the Stations of the Cross or come to the Friday night Lenten Supper.

We can do this as a way to have a closer personal relationship with God. And we can also do this to pray for those who are struggling with faith or with the Church, or for a greater respect for human life at all stages.

For fasting: We can follow the directives of the Church and abstain from eating meat today and on the Fridays of Lent and we might also adopt some other form of fasting that is more personal to us, like giving up chocolate or beer or our favorite chips or whatever.

We can do this fasting as a way for some personal self-discipline, as a help to lead us to “fast” from behavior that is harmful. And we can also do this socially as a way to feel moiré sensitivity to those who are really hungry and in need.

For charitable giving: I have spoken so much on this in recent months that I simply say that our giving is an expression of our own personal faith and it also helps God’s people and God’s work on this earth.

### **Conclusion**

With this understanding of the ashes and the richness they give to our Lenten practices, we now bless the ashes and have them placed on our foreheads.