

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

People Signed With Ashes

To accept the mark of ashes is to receive a summons — a call to be accountable for one's life, a call to penance, a call to allow God to do His work of purification and reconciliation. Ash Wednesday is a day of beginning, a day of commitment, a day of promise. It is a very human and joyful day.



Our life is filled with many beginnings: we begin life, we start school, we begin a new job or life together in marriage or retirement or eternal rest. These beginnings mean a new way of life for us, a form of living that we have not experienced before.

There are also new beginnings of the heart: new friendships, renewed promises, resolutions for the new year.

Ash Wednesday is a day of beginning. It is a day of the awesome acknowledgment of our weakness, failure, sin, humanity. We are summoned to make public our human poverty without God, to declare our unfaithfulness and self-righteousness, in humility before Him. In accepting the mark of the ashes, we make a mockery of ourselves for having made a mockery of our baptismal consecration with oil. This cross of ashes is a sign that our divine innocence, found in the waters of baptism, has gone sour; it is

rancid. We must be anointed afresh with the oil of gladness.

Our hearts call us to repentance and purification. We know our frailty, and we must empty ourselves of weakness and be filled with Christ. The powerlessness of our human strength must give way to the recreating power of God; the power of our selfish wills must turn and embrace the powerlessness of the Crucified One.

The Christian community also calls us, a call to rend our hearts: to let out our sins and be flooded with God's Springtime love. We must rip away the crustiness, dryness, boredom and drudgery of our lives and oil the joints of our spirits, to make them lively and to taste the mercy of God.

God calls us. He offers us the light of His Word to turn us away from our misguided steps. He is inviting us into His trust so that we might cast out paralyzing fear and receive His mercy and rejoice in His love.

Ash Wednesday is also a day of commitment: in beginning again we resolve to seek out and find the God who made us. We answer the call to penance as a means to life, a liberation from the burden of our weak humanity. We fast so that we might have food for the journey, that we might participate, with a clear and receptive heart attuned to His Word for us, in the mysteries of the death and rising of Christ Jesus. We pray with tears of sorrow to respond to that mystery,

that Word. And we reach out to our brothers and sisters, to build them up with caring words and deeds to value their every contribution, however small, and to be a sign of hope and healing for their discouragement and pain.

Finally, Ash Wednesday is a day of promise. There is no doubt that the cross of ashes traced on our foreheads is a stark reminder of our death, the result of our sin. Yet contained within this sign of the cross is a pledge of resurrection. Reminded of the depth of our sin, we are also reminded of the depth of God's mercy for us. God does not hate us or seek to punish us. As the entrance antiphon for the Ash Wednesday Eucharist says: "You have mercy upon us all, O Lord, and hate none of the things which you have made, overlooking our sins for the sake of repentance and sparing us, because you are the Lord our God." Thomas Merton wrote almost twenty years ago that "the God of Ash Wednesday is like a calm sea of mercy. In him there is no anger." This is the incredible depth of his devotion to His people. The ashes sign our whole being with the merciful blessing of God.

And so, our season of preparation and renewal begins, under this sign of death and life, of our sin and God's mercy, of sorrow and of joy. It is a day of new beginning, new commitment and an ever-new promise. May this season of repentance bring us God's blessing of forgiveness and the gift of Easter Joy!

vatican news

A House of Stone — A Union of Hearts

(Following is from the message of Pope Paul VI to French president Valery Giscard D'Estaing, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Palace of Europe in Strasbourg.)

The house built in stone that will be inaugurated shortly in Strasbourg represents and anticipates the edifice that the men and nations of Europe are building, with their very lives, to face together the period of history that is opening before them.



A long way has been covered since the Council of Europe was created at the appeal of men of heart and courage, guided by a clear perception of the needs of our times and the aspirations of their peoples, and capable of inventing new ways.

We appreciate particularly — we are anxious to tell you so on this solemn occasion — the work that this council has been carrying out in the varied and multiple fields of European cooperation for more than a quarter of a century. This activity may seem slow, but it marks out the direction of the lives of Europeans as they progress towards a human, more than political, unification.

We like to point out that the Council of Europe, the oldest of the European institutions, has carried out this activity in faithfulness to the ideal which the founders expressed in the preamble to its statute, namely, attachment to the human, spiritual and moral values which constitute the common heritage of the peoples of this continent.

And we are happy to stress one of the most meritorious fruits of the concerted action and commitment of the member states of the Council of Europe. Following on a past of wars and destruction, the common values arising from the vitality of ancient and varying peoples, refined by the Greco-Roman heritage, made purer and deeper and universal by the Christian faith, have received on the plane of juridical principles, renewed and effective expression in the European Convention on Human Rights. This was, one can say, a milestone, on the road towards the union of

peoples: does it not manifest the sacred determination to build this union on respect for the dignity of the person and for his freedoms and fundamental rights?

It is also encouraging to observe the direction followed in all the work carried out by the Council of Europe. The committee of ministers, the parliamentary assembly, the commissions of experts, is served by a secretariat and a body of officials whose competence equals their dedication. All have carried out from the beginning a resolute action to harmonize and fertilize on a reciprocal basis the social institutions and cultural heritages. They wished in this way to give these interwoven solidarities a suitable framework in the perspective of a more effective service of peace and justice in the world.

Precious energies have thus been released, an impetus has been given, a horizon of hope opened, which now make it possible to mobilize the creativity of everyone, and the young in particular, for new progress.

Our predecessors and ourselves have not ceased to encourage and stimulate all those who have applied themselves to the construction of a united Europe. By accrediting diplomatic representations to the European institutions, the Holy See wished to manifest its will to be present and to participate, according to the lines derived from its specific mission, in the common effort. The Holy See wished to get to know the patient and laborious advance of this effort to listen and learn and thus to contribute in a continuous dialogue to strengthen the human, moral and spiritual elements of the historic enterprise in progress.

The Holy See is itself situated in Europe, and from its origins, a considerable part of its actions, especially in the past, was involved in that of the European states. But it is not for this reason that it participates in the work of the Council of Europe, now that the Vatican City State is merely a guarantee of its spiritual autonomy: it is to all peoples that the Holy See wishes to offer its specific contribution, for their peace and development. But when coordination takes shape among the nations at a vast regional level, it takes a particular interest in it. And when these nations have all been consolidated in a Christian civilization, it feels specially concerned. Not to

dominate the destiny of these peoples, but to help them to realize it better, in conformity with their deep identity and for the good of all.

That the Christian tradition is an integral part of Europe is a question of fact. Even among those who do not share our faith, even where the faith burns low or has died out, the human fruits of the Gospel remain. They now constitute a common heritage which it is up to us to develop together for the advancement of men. The Church continues her mission of evangelization, along her own paths. Certainly she does not wish to become just the instrument of a human construction, or try to make a human construction the instrument of her progress.

But she is aware that, while evangelizing, she promotes man and human values. Always respecting the different movements of civilization and the spheres of competence which are characteristic of civil society, she proposes to you her assistance to strengthen and develop the particularly rich common heritage of Europe, many elements of which are familiar to her, even in harmony with her.

On the basis of this heritage, the Holy See, too, looks to the future of Europe with realism and hope. The social, cultural, judicial and spiritual conditions and necessities of European peoples are, in its eyes, precious indications to awaken consciences and point out to them the field in which their creative dynamism must be exercised.

All of our action is directed to fostering the blossoming of this dynamism. May you share our conviction that the Church and the Holy See, which is her mouthpiece, make an essential contribution in this regard! Who does not see the deeply human repercussion of the Gospel spirit of brotherhood and the renunciation that this latter implies? Without such a state of mind, it seems to us very difficult to reach the point where each one goes beyond his own point of view, renounces certain advantages and possibly certain of his rights that are not fundamental, in respect of those of others and in view of a higher common good. And without the trust that accompanies real brotherhood, how could the nations understand the fruitful future that commitment in widened solidarity opens up for their own historical heritage?