THE ASHES OF LENT

MARCH 5, 2000

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. The queues to receive the ashes in many churches are endless. Why? Why are the ashes so popular?

Their popularity, I suspect, comes from the fact that, as a symbol, they are blunt, primal, 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. Ashes are dust and dust is soil, humus; humanity and humility come from there. It is no accident that ashes have always been a major symbol within all religions. 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 not in a season of celebration, that you are grieving some of the things you have done and lost, that some important work is going on silently inside you, and that 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 lustre, and wait while the ashes do their work. All ancient traditions, be they religious or purely mythical, abound with stories of having to sit in the ashes. 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, the ashes.” 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 sitting in the cinders, of being smudged, of being humbled, and of waiting while a proper joy and consummation are being prepared. In the story of Cinderella there is a theology of lent.

Native American traditions too have always had an important place for ashes. In some Aboriginal communities there was the concept that occasionally someone would have to spend time in the ashes. Nobody knew why a specific person was called at a particular moment to sit in the ashes, but everyone knew that this was natural thing, that ashes do an important work in the soul, and that sooner or later that person would return his or her regular life and be better for having spent time in the ashes. To offer one such example: Certain native communities used to live in what they called long-houses. A long-house was the communal building; in effect, the house for the whole community. A long-house was long, rectangular, with large sloping sides, and with the centre of the roof open so that this could function as a natural chimney. Fires were kept burning, both for cooking and for warmth, all along the centre of the long-house. People gathered there, near the fires, to cook, eat, and socialize, but they slept away from the fires, under the roofs that sloped down either side of the open centre. Now, every so often, someone, a man or a woman, for reasons they didn't have to explain, would cease adhering to the normal routine. Instead he or she would, become silent, sit just off the fire in the ashes, eat very sparingly, not socialize, not go outside, not wash, not go to bed with the others, but simply sit in the cinders, like Cinderella. Today we would probably diagnose this as
clinical depression and rush that person off for professional help. They, for their part, didn't panic. They saw this as perfectly normal, something everyone was called upon to do at one time or another. They simply let the person sit there, in the ashes, until one day he or she got up, washed the ashes off, and began again to live a regular life. The belief was that the ashes, that period of silent sitting, had done some important, unseen work inside of the person. You sat in the ashes for healing.

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, to spend our time, like Cinderella, working and sitting among the cinders of the fire – grieving what we've done wrong, renouncing the dance, refraining from the banquet, refusing to do business as usual, waiting while some silent growth takes place within us, and simply being still so that the ashes can do their work in us.