

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

What We Wear

I've reached the conclusion that, to one extent or another, we are what we wear.

We have caps that carry the names of baseball teams, TV shows, colleges and even the Department of Sanitation. Our shirts are Polo or Lacoste, Hilfiger or Ralph Lauren. We walk in Nike, swim in Speedo, commute in Lexus (or, in my case, MTA). Our jackets are North Face or South Pole, our sweatshirts are Reebok, and our watches are Fossils.

Everything today has an insignia, name, design or logo. The first Christians were people of the Word, *logos*; we are people of just plain logos. We need other people to see who we are and what we wear, and we're all so eager to flaunt fashion and deify designers. See how we spend our money? Just look at these Sean John labels!

Which is what makes Ash Wednesday so potent—and important.

On this day, when the Church does not even obligate anyone to attend Mass, Catholics mob the aisles. Services are packed with the penitents and the prayerful, who line up in long silent rows for only one purpose: to present their foreheads and receive a smudge of something burned.

People have just got to get their ashes.

And it is no longer merely a Catholic phenomenon. Protestants are getting in on the act, too; I've heard of Lutherans and Episcopalians who have Ash Wednesday services, complete with ashes on the brow.

At first, I was taken aback by these interlopers, but I think I'm beginning to understand why they want to wear ashes. It's the same reason kids crave Fubu.

We need to show who we are. Because we are what we wear.

We are Christians. We bear the mark of Cain, and the ash of palms. We carry stains of centuries, burned onto our souls, smeared onto our heads.

Beneath the ash is our consciousness, and our conscience: the brain that enables us to choose between right and wrong, between sin and sacrifice, between despair and hope. But for this day, at this moment, it is marked. We are flawed. We have work to do.

Some people have noted, with no small irony, that the faithful jam the churches on Ash Wednesday because it's one of the few times you can come to Mass and get something for free (even if that something is, let's face it, dirt.) I think it goes a lot deeper. We want to be branded. We want to show our roots—and even the dirt around the roots.

Ash Wednesday is a day of atonement, but a day of testimony, too. It is a day when we proclaim ourselves as Christians, as followers of the Way—even when the Way leads to nothing but the remnants of an extinguished flame, brushed with a thumb against the brow, as crumbs fall to the floor and we feel the warm residue stick.

We go outside, into the winter chill, and can see others similarly marked, heading to work. We'll catch sight of it in the bathroom mirror, or the glass of a revolving office door, and see ourselves as others see us: unclean, unwashed. Stained. And we will feel connected to something older and richer than anything we've known.

Hold your head high. Get the ashes. Display them to the world.

Because we are what we wear. And one day we, too, will be ash.

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STATIONS OF THE CROSS

“Praying the Stations with Mary, the Mother of Jesus”
Fridays during Lent, at 7:30 p.m., followed by Benediction