



February 2008

The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
110 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL 60602 ❖ E-mail: FriarsLegion@aol.com
Phone: 312-372-5111, Ext. 338 ❖ Web Site: www.stpetersloop.org

A BRUSH WITH DEATH

Ash Wednesday we do things a little differently here at St. Peter's. In most parishes the blessing and distribution of the ashes takes place during the mass, right after the gospel and the sermon, and thus the context makes it hard to ignore the fact that the receiving of the ashes is our response to the first gospel of Lent, which is a clear call to repentance from the Lord, and an invitation to do the deeds of repentance: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. As beautiful and integral as that package is, it simply would not work here at St. Peter's, where many thousands of people come to begin their Lent with the reception of the ashes. Even if all of them had the desire and the time to attend the full mass, there would not be room for them, especially at the noon hour, nor could any reasonable schedule hope to supply the number of masses required. Therefore, we do it differently here. Upstairs, in the church, the masses of Ash Wednesday are celebrated throughout the day. And downstairs, in the auditorium, is where everyone goes to receive the ashes.

We do the best we can – and the worship director and the sacristan do very well indeed – to make the giving of ashes a prayerful moment. The lighting is subdued, music is playing, people are reminded if necessary to refrain from conversation, and the people actually are asked to kneel to receive the ashes, the which is probably not done in too many parishes these days. Yet for all this, the downstairs event is still incredibly brief, even if the waiting line is long. One kneels, the priest traces a cross on the forehead with the ashes and speaks an admonition of just a few words, and it is over. The person rises

and departs, perhaps brushing out of the eyes or off the front of their clothes any ashes that may have fallen there. The giving of ashes here at St. Peter's is a stand-alone event, a brief moment in an otherwise full and busy day. Can it really make a difference? Can it change a life?

The answer to those questions depends a great deal on whether we come to the ashes with ears open to hear the admonition. We know the words, before they are spoken. Even if the priest uses the newer formula (“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel”), the words of the old are engraved in the memory, and they are the ones that will echo in the mind that day: “Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return.” The word *death* is not spoken here, and so is all the more powerful for being the silent word at the heart of the moment. The slightest elaboration of the newer formula will bring that word into play – “Turn away from the path of sin that leads to death, and be faithful to the gospel of life.” And it is inescapable with the old words – “Remember that you are human, compounded of earth and a soul that comes from God, and when you die and the spirit returns to him who made it, what is left will once again resolve itself into earth.” Thus, the ever-so-brief, basement encounter with the ashes here at St. Peter's is a brush with death, a liturgical moment when we are, or might be, brought up short by our own mortality.

Can that change a life? Of course it can. It happens all the time. The nearly mortal illness, the traffic accident that could have killed us, the fall down a long staircase that left us

badly bruised but our neck unbroken, the car that came a hair's breadth from striking and killing my child – these are the kind of things that happen in a flash and that can leave a person profoundly changed. The problem with Ash Wednesday, at St. Peter's or any place else, is that it rolls around every year, it gets to be an expected and familiar part of our lives, and so it tends to lose some of its punch. Some. Maybe.

The annual ashing, however, is anything but inert, and is best regarded as unexploded dynamite. At any moment it could go off and tear a huge hole in the fabric of our ordinary lives. It has this power from its being not just a reminder of mortality but also a clear and unmistakable call to repentance. It thereby links, as if they were one, our death and our behavior. It says not just that we will die, but that the way we live will determine whether we will die altogether or be raised up to a fullness of life that we can only dream about on this side of the grave.

St. Fulgentius of Ruspe, a sixth-century bishop of North Africa, makes this and other connections in his treatise *On the Forgiveness of Sins*. He notes that St. Paul says in his first epistle to the Corinthians that “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (I Cor. 15:52-53). This resurrection transformation, if it happens at all, can only happen as the bestowal of a just reward, and for that to happen, we are in need of a transformation here and now, in this life. This grace has also been extended to us, and it is the grace of repentance, which empowers us to leave our old sinful ways behind and to begin to live lives worthy of the adopted sons and daughters of the living God. He writes, “Those, then, who in this present life are changed from bad to good are in

the future promised the reward of this transformation [from mortal to immortal].”

He continues, “It is by grace that the transformation arising from the gift of God is begun in them here by justification, which is a spiritual resurrection. Afterwards it is by grace that in the resurrection of the body, when that transformation of the justified is made complete, there will result a perfect glorification, which will remain unchanged for ever.”



St. Fulgentius thus sees a two-fold resurrection, which corresponds to the two-fold death that we find in the Scriptures, especially in the Book of Revelation and its frequent mention of “the second death.” Resurrection

leads to resurrection, or, if the grace of Christ is refused, then death follows upon death. The first resurrection, the spiritual resurrection of our being made righteous before God, happens when God's grace works in us to enlighten us to conversion. By this we pass from death to life, from unbelief to faith, and from evil deeds to a holy way of life. As a result of this, when we die our physical death at the end of this earthly life, “the second death,” eternal damnation, has no hold on us. However, if we refuse the grace of repentance and prefer to remain with our old patterns of a self-centered and self-indulgent life, then for us there is no spiritual resurrection here, nor the fullness of life and light there. Instead, we move through physical death to the second death, the pain of separation from God which we have chosen for, and imposed upon, ourselves. He concludes, “Therefore, as the first resurrection is constituted by the conversion of the heart, so the second death consists of everlasting torments.”

All of this is present in an instant on Ash Wednesday as we kneel in silence, feel the thumb trace the cross of the ashes on our forehead, and hear the solemn reminder that we

come from dust and will return to dust. No matter how old or young we are, we are winding down to death, to the moment when all will turn to dust and ashes, even our physical frame, and the only interesting question for us will be some version of the old Peggy Lee song, “Is that all there is?” In our Ash Wednesday moments, whether they actually happen on an Ash Wednesday or not, we sense that a gift is being offered to us and a choice is demanded of us. Do I accept it or not, this harsh and beautiful grace of conversion? The bishop Fulgentius understood that everything hangs on this answer, an answer that we make not just with a single word but with a whole life. “Every man who does not wish to be condemned to the eternal punishment of the second death should hasten to become a sharer in the first resurrection in this life. If anyone is changed in this present life by

fear of God and passes from a wicked to a good life, then he passes from death to life, and afterwards he will be changed from a humble, lowly state to glory.” It begins here, on the near side of the final judgment, and it can begin with a moment on the knees and a smudge on the forehead as well as at any other time or place.

On Ash Wednesday, Lent seems to be so very long. It stretches out ahead of us, week after week of trying to keep up our Lenten resolutions, with an impossibly distant Easter at the end of it. And yet with all that stands before us on Ash Wednesday, perhaps the season is not too long after all. St. Benedict wrote in his rule that for the monk, the whole of life is a Lent. We are not all monks, but there is still some truth in this for all of us. We need a long Lent, a whole lifetime, to let God sift the ashes of our mortality so as to bring us to eternal life.

— Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.

ST. PETER’S CAN BE YOUR RETIREMENT PLAN BENEFICIARY

Why not have the IRS contribute part of your gift to St. Peter’s?

Many of you may want to make a gift from your IRA, 401(k), or other retirement plan during life, but you might need those funds for your retirement. Making Catholic parishes and schools the “payable on death” beneficiary of your retirement account is a highly effective way to give. It’s easy, doesn’t involve giving money away during life that we might need some day, and has tremendous tax advantages.

Unless you have a Roth IRA, the funds in your IRA or other retirement plan will be taxed when you withdraw them. Not only that, when you leave the funds to loved ones at your death, they will be taxed when they withdraw those funds from your retirement plan. For instance, if an individual is named as death beneficiary of a retirement plan, and is in a 35% tax bracket, then they would only get to keep \$0.65 on the dollar of the withdrawals they take from that account. The rest would go toward taxes.

There is a way to eliminate those taxes while helping St. Peter’s Church tremendously. By making St. Peter’s the “payable on death” beneficiary of your retirement plan, money that would have gone to pay taxes instead goes directly to support the parish. In the example above, it is like having the IRS chip in \$0.35 of every dollar St. Peter’s receives. That is why naming a charity as the “payable on death” beneficiary of your retirement plan is often one of the most effective ways to give.

Most importantly, the money you donate will support the important work of St. Peter’s. Your legacy of faith will touch the lives of others for years to come.

To make St. Peter’s the “payable on death” beneficiary of your retirement plan, you can simply phone the company that administers your plan and ask for instructions on how you can change the death beneficiary of your account. You can also call the St. Peter’s business office, 312-853-2357, and talk to Br. Herb Rempe, O.F.M. if you have any questions. Thank you for considering this way of making a contribution to St. Peter’s and the work it does in the Loop.



MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS

The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter's for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: _____
Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by: _____

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter's each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter's Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter's, whom you support by your generosity



APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: _____
as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*