

There are lots of things that I find marvelous about our Catholic Church. One of my favorites is the depth and beauty of our Faith. How wide and deep and complex, yet simple and beautiful our doctrine is as long as we remain orthodox. Orthodoxy, conforming to the established doctrine of the Catholic Church, the principles of faith passed down to us in an unbroken chain from Saint Peter and the rest of the Apostles, through the Popes and Bishops to today and into the future.

If you were paying attention this last Sunday, you are probably wondering why I'm following up on Father Gaul's homily. I am, but I'm not. The importance of the uniformity of our teaching is a follow up, but the reason for it is to give credit where credit is due. The preaching of 3 Bishops, 3 direct descendants of the Apostles, inspires much of my homily today.

The first Bishop to put me on this path for Ash Wednesday is our own Bishop Luis. He doesn't like Bishop Zarma, says it is because whenever he got in trouble in High School, they called him out by his last name. I'll let you draw your own conclusions; I'm not going there! The second Bishop who helped with this homily is Saint Gregory of Nyssa who died in 395 AD in a province that is inside modern day Turkey. Then I drew some supporting comments from Blessed Bishop Fulton Sheen who was born in Illinois in 1895, studied in Europe and was a Bishop in New York in the 1960s.

A Bishop from Turkey, 1600 years ago, a Bishop who assisted then Father Joseph Ratzinger who later became Pope Benedict XVI during the Second Vatican Council and a Bishop born in Columbia and serving in Raleigh today all teach the same lesson. Their approach is different, but their intent, their teaching, their message is the same. And now, I get to package the teaching of the Church up for you in a manner that I hope makes sense to you here in Hope Hills, North Carolina.

Why is Ash Wednesday so popular? Why do so many people, Catholic and non-Catholic respond positively to Ash Wednesday? It isn't even a Holy Day of Obligation! The Mass is longer than usual because of the distribution of Ashes and yet the attendance at these Masses often rival Christmas and Easter.

Everyone here will line up and be told, "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return." In other words, you came from dirt, you are going to

die and go back to being dirt. Lovely thought, but people that don't attend any other Mass all year, attend Mass on Ash Wednesday.

The stark reminder of our own mortality has an impact on our hearts and softens them to make them more receptive to hearing and living the Word of God. We will all have eternal life, the soul cannot die; the worry is where will we spend it? Straight to heaven, Plan A? Eventually in heaven with a lay-over in Purgatory, Plan A.1? Or Plan B, that place we know enough about to know we don't want to end up there.

What are we all looking for? We are looking for 2 things, we are looking for mercy and we are looking for hope. No matter how large our ego may be, no matter how down-trodden or depressed we may feel, somewhere in us there is a small child looking for comfort, looking for peace, looking for someone to understand them. Looking for mercy and forgiveness for our many faults and transgressions. Looking for peace. All that looking is called hope.

Remember the song by the Byrds, 'Turn, Turn, Turn' released in 1965? The lyrics are based on the book of Ecclesiastes (3:1-8). One of the verses states that we have "a time to live and a time to die". But what does that mean? Is it simply we are born, then we die, that's it? Or does it go deeper?

Saint Gregory in one of his homilies reminds us that we don't get to choose to be born, and we don't get to choose when to die. Those 2 decision points belong to God alone. But we do get to decide to live, to be born into our faith and our relationship with Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In fact, every time we choose to die to sin, we are choosing once again to be born into Christ.

Every time we think we are loosing, or missing out on something because we all know that sin can be so much fun, we are gaining, growing, coming closer to what we all are hoping for, eternal life with Jesus and his Mother in heaven. Every act of self-denial, taking time to pray, giving up a meal, or giving to the Church and to the poor brings us closer to Our Lord.

Blessed Fulton Sheen, another Bishop reminds us that everybody diets. It is our intent that makes that diet into a fast and gives it value. Given the intent to offer the diet as a sacrifice makes a diet into a fast, then it stands to reason when we have a conversation with ourselves, we can turn that

conversation with our intent and have the same conversation with God. We call that prayer and it has value.

Many of us literally blow through hundreds of dollars every month on junk. Impulse buying because we are bored, junk food, and just how many pairs of shoes can someone wear? But if we controlled those urges for the next 5 weeks, and give that money to the poor... We have alms giving.

As much as we may want to believe that the best things in life are free, we know through our experience that the best things are those where we had to sacrifice something in order to acquire or experience them. Some will say that love is free. No it isn't! Love requires sacrifice; people who are willing to sacrifice for each other; that care about the other more than themselves. Love without sacrifice is a perversion, is something else, but it isn't love

We know that can't earn the very best of the best, our salvation, our entrance into heaven; that is beyond us. It can only come to us as a gift from God through the sacrifice of his Son. Even this is not entirely free. Jesus still expects us to do all he commanded us to do.

We can contribute to our own salvation, we can make an effort to show that we care. We can use this Lenten Season to exercise some self-discipline, to modify our behavior into something that is more pleasing to Christ. To lay the sacrifice of those acts of self discipline at the foot of the altar. To die in order to be born.

Doing this will improve our lives, It will make us more pleasing to Jesus and it will give us a reason to hope.