

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Ash Wednesday  
March 6, 2019

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Today all over the world one-quarter of earth's inhabitants is doing a remarkable thing. Men and women, boys and girls, are lined up waiting to have a rough sign of the Cross made on their foreheads. This Cross leaves a black mark, made by pressing abrasive ashes to the skin. There is more. The person receiving this Cross of ashes also hears devastating words: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." Some people think this ceremony is not only primitive but depressing and unhealthy. In our so-called modern age why do people who only occasionally go to Mass on Sunday line up for ashes on Wednesday? We all know our bodies return to dust when we die. In the liturgy of the Catholic Church on Ash Wednesday we literally rub it in!

Receiving ashes today only makes sense when it is connected to Holy Scripture. In *Genesis* we are told "The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground." And in the next sentence: "God breathed into [man's] nostrils the breath of life." The Bible first tells us we are dust, and then declares Almighty God breathed into our dust His divine life-giving breath. The affirmation of Holy Scriptures is that something of *decisive importance* happened to our dust. Our dust was made rich beyond measure by the very life of God.

Keep these two truths together. The assertion of the Bible is that they are *inseparable*. They are the very foundation of hope in the long sad story of human affairs. You can read that story for yourself. Governments and rulers have a tendency to see populations as a problem to be manipulated at best and exterminated at worst. They want to treat us like dust. They forget about the life of God in us. The Gospel proclaims that a human being, *any* and *every* human being, has immense significance. Despite the hatreds and cruelties in our track record, the reason we do not give up on human nature is because God has breathed His life into our dust.

We very badly need to be reminded of our true and unvarnished condition. Holy Church gives us this yearly reminder in a vivid act of liturgy on Ash Wednesday. Reaching back into the old story, recalling something from the very dawn of creation, the church reminds us of our origin and destiny. We need that reminder because in our modern culture it has become very deep in our nature to deny where

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we have come from and where we are going. Until recent times we sought to reassure ourselves we are in control. But global warming and rising sea levels, severe weather extremes, and an ocean full of plastic bottles challenged that sense of being in control. So we tried other things. We developed the capacity to clone human bodies without souls, and we engineer personal behavior and gender changes and wind up arguing with robots on the telephone and internet. Those robots want to replace us in the workforce. These too are signs we have gone wrong in the vocation given us by our Creator. All the brilliance and creativity of the last thousand years in the arts and sciences is nothing more than a shimmering trace of the divine breath within us. But it is crucial to recognize that all human responsibility and endeavor depends on one foundational condition: that we too are creatures, formed of dust, and infused with the life-giving breath of God.

That simple action of having a Cross of ashes traced on our foreheads is a reminder not to become mesmerized or infatuated with our human achievements, discoveries, accumulations of power, and our potential for more, or to become cynical when it all goes wrong. The airplane was a great invention. It allows us to fly to London in six hours. But the airplane was also used to bomb London and Dresden, and hundreds of other cities. If we forget we are the servants of our Creator it is easy to succumb to the twisted urge that we ourselves are the creator. When humanity does that, our lives and our whole planet are in terrible danger.

Holy Scripture gives us our true self-image. It is both sobering and glorious. We are dust, but dust which contains the life of God. And so, receiving ashes at the beginning of the holy season of Lent, we are called to work with and for Almighty God, to be extensions of Our Lord's incarnate life, aligning and confirming our wills to His, and receiving His grace to do it.