



Your comments are welcome!

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DEAR FRIEND OF THE MISSIONS,

February is the shortest month of the year, but there are still a lot of things happening.

February 2 is the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple. It is the day that the Church blesses candles and honors Jesus as the Light whom the darkness can not overcome.

February 3 is the Feast of St. Blaise. On this day the Church blesses throats. February 22 is the Feast of the Chair of Peter. February 21 is Ash Wednesday, a day of fast and abstinence. On February 25, the Church celebrates the Rite of Election usually at the Cathedral with the bishop. On this day those who are not baptized are called as candidates for baptism at the Easter Vigil. (Please keep them in your prayers.) Each

February the Church has a day set aside to remember those in religious life (Feb 4), those who are sick (Feb 11) and those who are married (Feb 11 also). Please join the Church in prayer for those groups. Be assured of our prayers for you and your intentions, especially that this Lent will be a time of personal renewal for you and your loved ones. God bless you all for your generosity to the missions!

Fr. Russell Becker, O.F.M.

Ash Wednesday



By Fr. Russell Becker, OFM

For those who are already baptized, Lent begins on the Wednesday before the First Sunday of Lent: Ash Wednesday. Christians gather to prepare for the celebration of Easter and the renewal of their baptismal commitment. We acknowledge that we are sinners, and recognize God as the One who offers us the forgiveness that we seek.

For those who are preparing for baptism at the Easter Vigil, Lent begins with the Rite of Election usually celebrated on the First Sunday of Lent. This begins their intense preparation (retreat) for their immediate preparation for baptism, confirmation and eucharist. The whole community joins them in preparing for Easter and prays for them as they are about to take this most important step.

The ceremonies of Ash Wednesday recall the time of the early Church when there was a special ministry to serious public sinners. People who had acted in a way which denied the Gospel

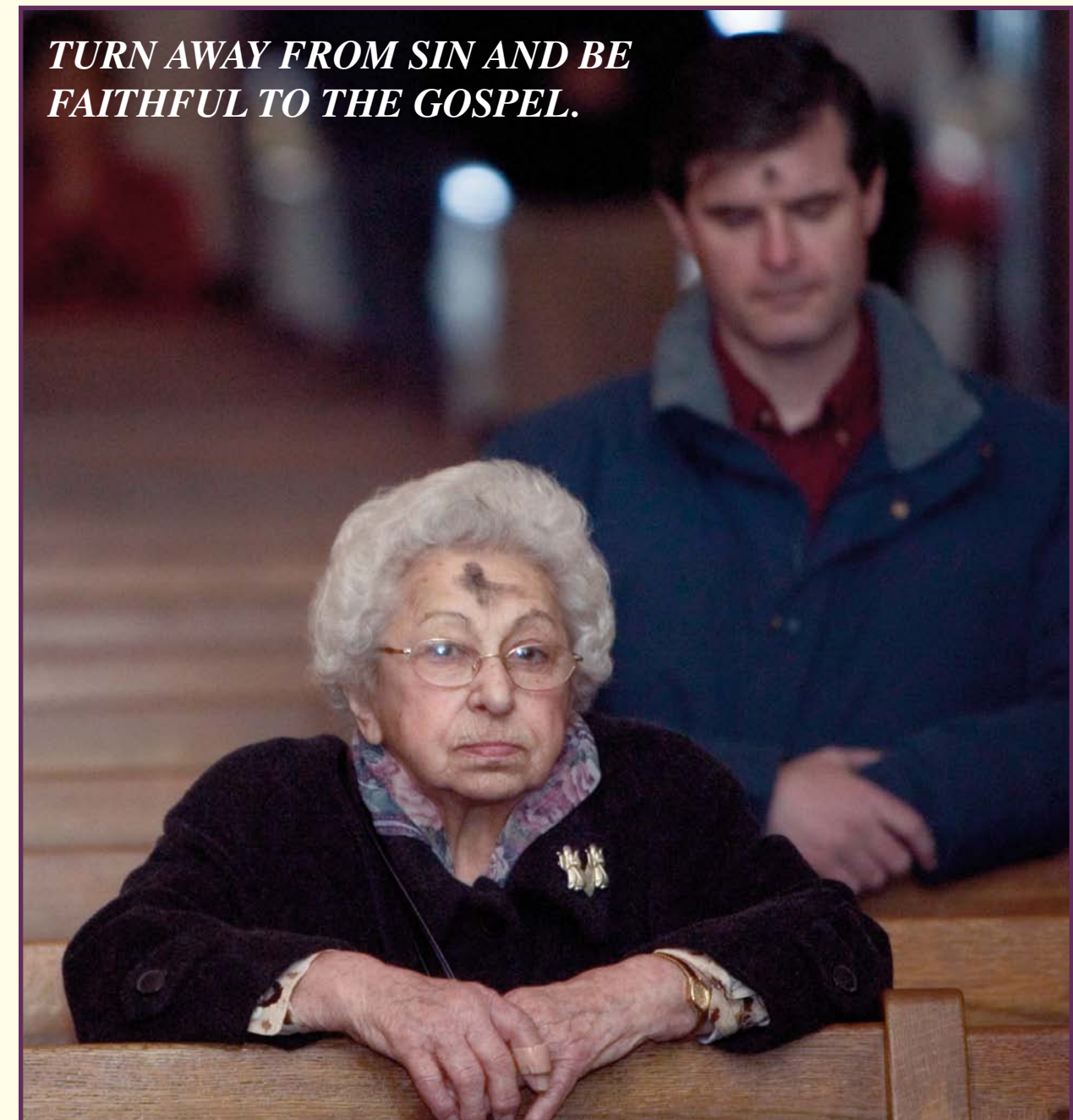
put themselves at odds with the community, and underwent a process through which they were restored to full communion with the community. This process began with a ceremony during which those people put on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of their sorrow for their sins and desire to repent. They were sent from the church to be instructed in the meaning of the Gospel and the Christian Faith, and how it was to be lived.

After they had shown that they were ready to live by the Gospel, they were restored to the Church in a reconciliation rite on the morning of Holy Thursday. Then they were able to participate in the Sacred Triduum and renew their baptismal commitment with the rest of the community when the Sacraments of Initiation were celebrated. About the 11th century, the Church ceased this practice for public sinners.

What we have today, is a ritual in which the entire community gathers and commits to the discipline of Lent by responding to the call to conversion. As ashes are placed on our heads, we are told to ***TURN AWAY FROM SIN AND BE FAITHFUL TO THE GOSPEL.*** The discipline of Lent begins, and the whole community is directed to the traditional practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The older form for the imposition of ashes is **“Remember you are dust and unto dust you shall return.”** Perhaps it is good to take this advice too as we begin Lent: use Lent as a time to **REMEMBER.**

Remember. At this celebration, we are asked to remember our sins and the call to conversion that the Lord gave to each of us. We hear the prophets call us to "Come back to the Lord with all our hearts." Our past can be left in ashes for we have the opportunity of approaching the Lord once again for healing and forgiveness. At the very same time we are reminded of our sinfulness, we are reminded of the Lord's compassion and mercy. While it is often easy to remember failure, Lent reminds us to have as vivid a memory of God's merciful love. We can be forgiven!

Remember. Life is frail and fleeting, but ever renewing. Ashes are a poignant symbol of this. All you have to do is see the results of a fire. There are some terrific forest fires that have devastated some very beautiful places like Yellowstone Park. The results of the fire seem so destructive, but come the next Spring, there is new growth. Out of ashes comes new life. We are reminded that life is a gift and that we should cherish it. This life we have is an opportunity to live as children of God. We are supposed to make the best of that opportunity in thanksgiving for that gift. But when we fail and everything falls apart, the Lenten Spring gives us an opportunity to renew. We can rise from the ashes!



“Remember you are dust
and unto dust you shall
return.”



Remember. With the readings and rites that are associated with the preparation of the Elect for baptism, we are reminded of who we are, and what we have promised. In Baptism we have become sons and daughters of God and members of the Church. In the ceremony of baptism we made promises which we have often failed to keep. Now is the time to turn back and prepare to renew this commitment. When the Church initiates new members at the Easter Vigil, the present members of the community renew their baptismal promises and try to live them with a new intensity. We are all given a fresh start!

In all this remembering, the Church leads us to sorrow for our sins, our missed opportunities, and our lack of commitment. This is not a sorrow that will destroy us, but a sorrow that will lead us to renewal. By the grace of God, so richly celebrated on this day and through all of Lent, we will be given a new opportunity to rise from the ashes to renewed life in Christ. Perhaps the

following thought from St. Gregory of Narek (11th century) can help us to embrace Lent with firm resolve:

There was a time when I did not exist, and you created me; I did not pray to you for a wish, and you fulfilled it; I had not come into the light, and you saw me; I had not yet appeared, and you took pity on me; I had not invoked you, and you took care of me; I did not raise my hand, and you looked at me; I had not entreated you, and you were merciful to me; I had not uttered a sound, and you heard me; I had not groaned, and you lent me an ear; with all knowing eyes you saw the sins of my guilty self, and yet you fashioned me. And now, I whom you have created, and saved, and tended with such care, let me not perish by the blow of sin. Let not the fog of my stubbornness triumph over the light of your forgiveness; nor the hardness of my heart over your forbearing goodness; nor my material weakness over your unconquerable grandeur.

[St. Gregory of Narek, 11th cent.].



Reflection Questions:

1. What does the “turn away” mean for you?

2. Lent is an act of faith—believing that we can recover from anything in God’s love. Do you believe that?

3. What are you going to do for Lent?

Please remember Fr. Aubrey
McNeil, O.F.M. (Southern US) his
birthaday is February 16.

May God bless him and give him
strength and energy in his ministry!

Also Remember the friars who are or
have been missionaries who are ill:

Bishop Benedict Coscia, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Thomas Fox, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Br. Rosario Vieira, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Charles Finnegan, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Robert Nee, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Clement Healy, O.F.M. (Jamaica)

Fr. Camion Lally, O.F.M. (Japan)

Fr. Finian Riley, O.F.M. (Africa)

Fr. Arthur Murray, O.F.M. (Southern US)

Fr. Peter Sheridan, O.F.M. (Southern US)

Give them health and length
of days, O God