

**Homily for Ash Wednesday  
February 14, 2018**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Today, Ash Wednesday, marks the beginning of our Lenten journey, a journey that lasts forty days and leads us towards the joy of Easter, the victory of life over death. During this time of reflection and penance it is important for us to recognize that the gift of eternal life that we have inherited had a high price, namely, that of the cross raised on Golgotha on which the Son of God made man suffered and died.

Just a few moments ago, in our first reading we heard the prophet Joel telling the Jewish people to return to the Lord with their whole heart through fasting and weeping and mourning. This message is one that is not limited to the people of Joel's time. Quite the opposite, we must take this message to heart and put it into practice in our daily lives. To "return to God with all your heart" on this Lenten journey means embracing the cross, and following Christ along the path which leads to Calvary. It is a

journey which teaches us each day to abandon our selfishness and self-absorption in order to make room for our Lord, who opens our minds and hearts to love Him and others as He loves us.

While the Church observes Ash Wednesday today, the world around us is fixated on Valentine's Day, with people rushing around to purchase cards, or flowers, or gifts to celebrate a day dedicated to what our secular culture views as love. However, it seems that many people have forgotten that the color red is associated with St. Valentine's Day because Saint Valentine died as a martyr. Valentine was a holy priest in Rome, who assisted the martyrs in the persecution under Claudius II. He was apprehended, and sent by the emperor to the prefect of Rome, who, on finding all his promises to make him renounce his faith ineffectual, commanded him to be beaten with clubs, and afterwards, to be beheaded. He was executed on February 14, about the year 270. Rather than celebrating some sort of romantic sentimentality today, I suggest that it would be more appropriate on St. Valentine's Day to focus on the sacrifices that true love demands of us.

Martyrdom does not refer only to the ultimate sacrifice of giving one's life for the faith, but includes the many other large and small ways

that we die to our own desires and wishes so that we might return to God with all our heart. As we begin this Lenten season, I hope that each one of you will examine what sort of sacrifice you can make or perhaps are already making that will allow your love for Christ and your commitment to live as His disciple to become ever deeper, for, without sacrifice, our love for the Lord remains empty or even unfulfilled. In fact, one of the most powerful ways that we can unite ourselves to Him is through uniting our sacrifices to the sacrifice that He made for us on the Cross.

While giving up a favorite food or drink, a particular meal, or something we enjoy doing such as watching our favorite television show pales in comparison to the sacrifice our Lord made for us in laying down His life on the cross, these mortifications do give us the opportunity to offer up our discomfort by dying to ourselves so that we may return to Him.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as we enter into this period of penance during the season of Lent, it is my hope that the sacrifices you make will bring you closer to our Lord in this life so that you might spend all eternity with Him in the life that is to come.

May God give us this grace. Amen.