

**Homily for Ash Wednesday
March 5, 2025**

**Sacred Heart-Griffin High School (9:30 A.M.) and
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (12:05 P.M.)
Springfield, Illinois**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

When I was a young priest in my first parish assignment, I remember an incident when I was celebrating Mass on Ash Wednesday in a large church with a packed crowd. As we will do today, I distributed ashes to the congregation immediately after my homily. Later at Mass, I distributed Holy Communion at the usual time. One man, who apparently came in late and missed the first line with the distribution of ashes, came up to me in the line for Holy Communion. I held up the host and said, "The Body of Christ." He looked at the Host and exclaimed, "I don't want THAT! I came for ashes!"

That incident stuck in my memory because it expresses exactly the opposite of what our priorities should be. When look at the ashes that remind us of our mortality, we should be thinking, "I don't want THAT!" What we should want with all our heart and mind and soul is to receive

Our Lord in Holy Communion, because He saves us from death and leads us to eternal life! Indeed, we receive ashes only once a year at the beginning of the Lenten season, but we should receive Holy Communion every Sunday and can even receive Our Lord everyday in the Holy Eucharist if we wish.

The first time we get in line on Ash Wednesday is to remember a great truth: We are not immortal, and what we have will be gone someday. One of the formulas for the distribution of ashes today is, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This is a great reminder that nothing we own or accomplish in life will last forever. Ashes mark the beginning of Lent and remind us of our mortality, but we must remember that Lent culminates with the celebration of Easter and the promise of eternal life!

The second time we line up today is to remember another great truth: In surrendering everything to God, we can gain Jesus Christ. It is in this giving that we receive, and we do not have to wait to die in order to do so. We are able to experience and savor a foretaste of heaven every time we receive Holy Communion. This gives us great hope!

This year our observance of Lent takes place during the Jubilee Year of 2025. A Jubilee Year is a significant moment in the life of the Church in which she celebrates the year of grace inaugurated by Christ through his Incarnation and Paschal Mystery.¹ Proclaimed every twenty-five years since the thirteenth century, the celebration of jubilee years typically includes pilgrimages, processions, celebrations of Mass, and an invitation to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. These liturgical celebrations are opportunities to receive the Lord's mercy, especially through the practice of the Jubilee indulgence, and lead to the performance of works of mercy.

The theme for this Jubilee Year is "Pilgrims of Hope." The title given by Pope Francis to his document declaring the Jubilee Year of 2025 is *Spes non confundit*, Latin for "Hope does not disappoint," taken from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans (*Rom* 5:5), in which Saint Paul offered these words of encouragement to the Christian community of Rome. Similarly, Pope Francis wrote, "Hope is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross ... Christian hope does not deceive or disappoint because it is grounded in the certainty that nothing and no one may ever separate us from God's love."²

What does it mean to have hope? Hope is not the same thing as optimism. The word “optimism” comes from the Latin word *optimus*, which means, “the best.” An optimist may seek to put the best spin on a bad situation. As such, optimism can be an attitude that looks for something good even when everything looks bad. There is nothing wrong with that, but optimism in that sense could also be superficial or even an act, pretending to look on the bright side of things while feeling miserable inside.

Hope goes much deeper. Hope is based on an interior trust in God and a belief that divine grace ultimately leads to good. It is no accident that hope is one of the theological virtues, along with faith and love. If we have a solid faith in God’s Providence, we will have hope for the future, and this will lead to a life of loving God and neighbor.

Just a few moments ago, in our first reading we heard the prophet Joel telling the people to return to the Lord with their whole heart through fasting and weeping and mourning. To “return to God with all your heart” on this Lenten journey means to put all our hope and trust in Him, by abandoning our selfish desires in order to make room for our Lord, who opens our minds and hearts to love Him and others as He loves us.

The best practices for Lent are those suggested by Jesus himself in the Gospel that we just heard, which is read at Mass every year on Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18), namely, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The whole point of each of these practices is that God the Father “who sees what is hidden will repay you.”

As we enter into this season of Lent, it is my hope that your Lenten practices will bring you closer to our Lord in this life so that you will share the great hope of spending all eternity with Him in the life that is to come.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ (Cf. Lk 4:19; John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente*, nos. 11- 16).

² Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, given in Rome on May 9, 2024, par. 3; accessed online December 23, 2024, at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html.