

The Inclusive Community

February 25, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Ash Wednesday

It is a day to count losses.

Ashes are such a powerful symbol of loss! As close to total absence as we get. No shape. No form. Emptiness.

Let us reflect on loss by looking at three issues connected with it.

1. The Experience of Loss

We lose the irreplaceable in life and sometimes never recover; and, we lose some things that we get back again.

We suffer deprivations which cut us to the core; and sometimes trivial losses. Strangely, we fret over the trivial losses more than they are worth because we have become accustomed to them and made them part of ourselves in spite of their superficiality.

We wake up some mornings and sense the bottom has fallen out of everything; we experience less devastating moments when there is only a vague feeling of dislocation.

The losses may be sudden and sharp. Or there may be a prolonged dull ache of something missing.

We respond to some losses with grief, traumatized, stunned, paralyzed. We react to others with anger and wild energy, with frustration and self-pity, with lingering questions about the fairness of life or about why it should be ourselves rather than others. Jesus experiences losses all life long. He wanders alone after John the Baptist dies and weeps at the grave of Lazarus. He loses friends and family, his reputation and his comfort.

He wonders if there will be faith any more in the future. He loses God on the cross and all his dreams and then his life.

Ash Wednesday. A time to count losses. We all suffer them. No one is spared.

The worst loss is to live with are those we bring on ourselves, by our own behavior, by choice or by inadvertence.

Jesus felt this too.

He must have wondered if it all might have been better if only he had done some things differently. He was human after all.

To be human is to lose. Only human beings seem to know how to count the losses.

2. The Need for Context

One of the results of the experience of loss is the larger view of life it offers. We find a context for it. We evaluate our priorities and options differently. We change our identity. We become aware that we did not need that possession, that house, that income, that job. We ask what made us trust that lost friend or we wonder what in us led to the failure of that relationship. We look at other lives, especially those that sustained losses like ours, and we change the context of our lives so that we might cope as they did.

We never lose in isolation. Loss always has a context.

As we adjust the context, we begin to recover. And we become a new person.

Easter becomes a context in which to place the cross. The Spirit becomes the context in which to handle the absence of Jesus. The community becomes a context to handle our loneliness. The Eucharist becomes, in the right community, the context to handle despair, and we find hope.

Jesus is a context for Ash Wednesday. The Gospel is a context when we can no longer read or understand the script of our own lives.

3. A Way Out

Almost as soon as we lose, we seek escape. We look for a way out, another path, a new road, a set of alternatives. When we do not find them, we feel trapped.

The best way out is always community and relationships. Our first instinct is to hide, like a hurt puppy, wanting to be alone in some corner of the room or under the bed. Sometimes the trauma is so sharp that we never come out again. Healing however, cannot happen there. A physician cannot heal himself or herself, not in any substantial manner. A psychiatrist cannot heal his or her dysfunctionality. For healing, deep human healing, we need one another. We need the heart and the arms, the tears and the words, the comfort and the nearness of our friends. No pain is as sharp and lacerating as the pain of having no one.

The Inclusive Community is a community of healing for us. We bring our burdens and the ashes of our lives here. And we go home whole again or at least with hope or at the very least knowing that we are not abandoned.

The best way out is a community which is shaped by the Spirit of Jesus. If we are going to build a community, what role model or guide could possibly help us more to build a better community than Jesus of Nazareth and all that was best in him?

It is a night of ashes and loss. A night of the upper room of betrayal and the hill of crucifixion. A night when the kiss in the garden is a kiss of death, when swords are drawn and force is used and all the ways out are blocked,

We are the community that knows all of this. We gather on Ash Wednesday night with our bitter memories and painful scars. It is here that we shall wait for Easter, for the life beyond the ashes. We believe Jesus is present whenever two or three gather in suffering. This community is the miracle God has given us for our healing and our hope. This community will show us the way home by making a path out of friendship and fidelity. Here we are not alone. Here we learn that God has not forsaken us.