

(Readings: Joel 2:12-18; Ps. 51; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

An Italian newspaper recently carried a story about a young couple in Milan who seemed particularly devoted in their worship. The priest at a cathedral there reported that the pair spent an hour or more on a regular basis sitting before a statue of the Virgin Mary. Naturally, he assumed they were praying.

Turns out, this young couple was recharging their cell phone. They had noticed a stray electric cable sticking out of the wall behind the statue of the Virgin Mary. Whenever their phone's power supply dwindled, the young couple came to the church and re-charged it from the cable behind the Virgin Mary. The priest states that the young couple is welcome to use his church for this purpose.

We talk about coming to church to "re-charge our batteries," but this is ridiculous! What looked to the unobservant eye like an act of piety was actually a self-serving ploy to save money. This young couple was using the church for their own needs. And we're shocked -- until we realize that sometimes we may be guilty of the same mistake.

We are fortunate to live in a time when recycling is becoming ever more prevalent. By diverting paper and plastics and other materials away from landfills and toward recycling, that which we once threw away can be transformed into something new and useful. Think of the equipment on local playgrounds. Much, if not all, of the plastic we see comes from recycled milk jugs and other plastic items. Something that once seemed to have reached the end of its useful life was collected, reshaped and re-formed into something that will provide joy and usefulness for many years to come.

As we gather on this Ash Wednesday, we enter into the Church's great plan for recycling. The ashes that will be imposed on our foreheads in just a short time are a wonderful representation of this.

Once the beautiful palm branches that we waved in great joy as we recalled Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, these palm-branches-become-ashes will be used to remind us of the need for repentance, change and growth as we enter into this season of Lent.

That recycling of the palms of Palm Sunday into the ashes of Ash Wednesday is a reminder that God is seeking to recycle us: “Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart.” God wishes to lovingly reshape and reform our hearts and our lives.

Whatever is not true or beautiful or worthy of God in our lives needs to be purged from us by God’s grace and mercy during the forty days of Lent. Although the springtime of Easter may seem distant now, we have this opportunity to respond to God’s loving invitation to grow and change.

Just as we gathered the palms of Palm Sundays past, so we are now gathered here to begin this Lenten journey of recycling. We ask that the season of Lent that opens before us may be a time filled with God’s love and mercy, and the grace of conversion in our hearts and in our lives. This is our opportunity to be gathered into God’s recycling bin, so to speak.

Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday fall on two peculiar secular days this year. Today is February 14th – Valentine’s Day. A time for lovers to re-ignite their passion and romance for each other. Because today is a day of fasting from big meals and abstaining from meat, I hope you celebrated Valentine’s Day last Sunday or yesterday on Mardi Gras – “Fat Tuesday.”

One husband told me that treated his wife to a meal fit for royalty – he took her to Burger King for dinner and Dairy Queen for dessert!

But wouldn’t this Valentine’s Day be a most appropriate day to observe Ash Wednesday: to re-ignite our faith and faith-practice, to fall in love once again with the God-Man Who gave everything He had in death because of His love for us? Can we this Lent ask Jesus Christ to be OUR Valentine, and us to be His?

Remember all those little tiny paper valentines we would give to each other in school? I wasn’t one of the popular kids back then, so I didn’t get many. And those little candy hearts that had messages written on them became “weapons of slight destruction” when aimed and fired at us!

What would Jesus’ Valentine look like? Why not draw it in your imagination? On the front of the card is a face of Jesus asking, “How much do I love you?” On this inside, Jesus spreads His arms wide on the cross and says,

"This much!"

Easter Sunday falls on another, more dubious day – April Fool's Day. And again, what kind of a fool gives up Divine Glory to humble Himself to come among us as a man? What kind of foolish Messiah is looking for a kingdom not of power, and weapons and victors and losers, but a kingdom filled with the poor, the crippled, the disabled, the castaways, and the brokenhearted? And what kind of fool gives us His very self on this altar of sacrifice? Only a fool, it would seem, but what a fool!

St. Josemaria Escriva said, **"Lent should suggest to us these basic questions: Am I advancing in my faithfulness to Christ, in my desire for holiness, in a generous apostolate in my daily life, in my ordinary work among my colleagues? ... What better way to begin than Lent? Let's renew our faith, hope and love."**

Let us pray that the same God who graciously transforms our simple gifts of bread and wine into the body and blood, soul and divinity of his Son will lovingly transform each of us, so that we might rise, reshaped and renewed, in the glory of Easter.

Today, when you leave church, you are going to leave as "ambassadors of Christ" as St. Paul tells us. You will be walking posters with crosses on your foreheads, living advertisements of faith. As Jesus reminds us, we are called to put our Catholic faith into practice. May God give us the strength to do that this Lent. AMEN!