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For Your Penance, Look Redeemed / Lent with a smiling Christ

By Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ

Lent is a problem today. As I was growing up, and even much later, words like penance, sacrifice, fasting, and abstinence were part of our Lenten vocabulary. They had been drilled into us—in church, at home, especially in the parochial school. I do not say they have disappeared (witness, for example, the Lenten pastorals), but they no longer dominate our mind-set and speech patterns. This is not the place lo argue the reasons: do you indict our culture, or do you blame it all on Vatican II?

Although this movement raises problems for the "old Lenten spirit," I do not find it without value. For one thing, it has compelled me lo rethink the meaning of Lent in l liturgy and life. The process was brought to a head as I prepared to preach in Georgetown University's Dahlgren Chapel on the first Sunday of Lent 1979.

The fresh (not new, simply rediscovered) approach to Lent in this homily began with a holy card: the "smiling Christ" of Lérins. It concretized questions with which I had been struggling for quite some time. What precisely is the Christian trying lo do these forty days? Is there room for Lenten laughter? If there is, what is its relationship lo the tears of Lent? Where should our penitential emphasis lie? What ought we to "give up"—besides sin?

I think I learned something about Lent; I know I learned something about myself.

In the famous Abbey of Lérins, on an island off the southeast coast of France, there is an unusual sculpture. It may go back to the twelfth century, and it has for title Christ souriant, "the smiling Christ." Jesus is imprisoned on the cross; his head is leaning some what to the right; his eyes are closed—in death, I think; but on his lips there is a soft, serene smile.

The smiling Christ—here is my springboard for Lent. And if you prefer Scripture to sculpture, if you need a text to test my orthodoxy, I give you Jesus in Ash Wednesday's Gospel: "When you fast, do not look gloomy, like the hypocrites" (Mt 6:16). I know this raises a problem, and I'm glad it does. As usual, three points. First, a look at Jesus: did he really smile? Second, a look at Lent: is it for laughing or for crying? Third, a look at you: what now till Easter?

I

First then, a look at Jesus: did he really smile? Did he actually laugh? One tradition is enshrined in some fourth-century monastic rules of St. Basil the Great: "so far as we know from the story of the Gospel, he never laughed. On the contrary, he even pronounced those unhappy who are given to laughter (Lk 6:25)." Oh yes, he had "joy of spirit," he had "merriment of soul." But as for its "outward expression," as for "hilarity," no. Such a one would not be "master of every passion," would not be "perfectly continent."1

True, the Gospels never say that Jesus smiled or laughed, as they twice testify that he wept—over Jerusalem and over Lazarus, over his city and his friend. But I do not understand how one who was like us in everything save sin could have wept from sorrow but not laughed for joy. How could he fail to smile when a child cuddled comfortably in his arms, or when the headwaiter at Cana wondered where the good wine had come from, or when he saw little Zaccheus up a tree, or when Jairus' daughter wakened to life at his touch, or when Peter put his foot in his mouth once again? I refuse to believe that he did not laugh when he saw something funny, or when he experienced in the depths of his manhood the presence of his Father. Too often Christians have been so aware of Jesus' divinity that his humanity became somewhat unreal, artificial. No, he was like us…

I do not say Jesus smiled when his fellow townsmen cast him over a cliff. I do not pretend he laughed in Gethsemane. I do not know if he died with a smile on his lips. There are moments when you cannot smile, when it makes no sense to laugh. But that's not the point. The point is: here is a man whose whole life was a movement to a cross, a man who cried out that he was in anguish until his death should be accomplished—and still he moved through life very much as we do. He attracted not only fishermen and centurions but children, simple folk, women like Mary of Magdala—and he could hardly have done so with thunderbolts, if he had only "spoken with authority," if his face wore ever the stern mask of a judge and did not crease into a smile or break out into merry laughter.

II

Second, a look at Lent: is it for laughing or for crying? Granted that Jesus smiled, is there any place for the smiling Christ these forty days? I say there is. But to understand this, you must grasp a crucial Christian fact: in Lent we are not pretending.

Neither in Lent's liturgy nor in Lent's living dare we make believe that Christ is not yet risen, that we have to wait for Easter to see his resurrection, to live it, to enjoy it. Even in Lent you and I are *risen* Christians. And the twin fact that Jesus is risen and that we have risen with him into a new life must color the way we celebrate Lent, must color our asceticism, our self-denial. Oh yes, during these weeks we re-present the stages of our Lord's pilgrimage to Jerusalem, his way to the cross; but we do it as *risen* Christians. And that means we do right to reproduce in our own Lent, in our own suffering, on our own cross, the smiling Christ of Lérins. The cross is victory, not defeat; and we do not have to wait for that victory, wait for Easter to dawn.

But we cannot pretend the other way either. Simply because we have risen with Christ in baptism, we cannot make believe that Lent does not really exist. Risen we are, but not yet *fully* risen: "We ourselves," St. Paul agonizes, "we who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inside ourselves as we wait for…the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23). And so

we must ceaselessly reproduce the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, not only symbolically and liturgically but in our flesh and bones and in the wrenching of our spirit. That is why our laughter is not yet full-throated; that is why it is often through tears that we smile; that is why we still have to pray "Father…remove this cup from me" (Lk 22:42). We have not been transformed completely into the risen Christ; that transformation will take place only if we go up to Jerusalem with Jesus. The smiling Christ rests on a cross.

Is Lent for laughing or for crying? I say, for both. But I am stressing the laughter of Lent because it is so far removed from our spirituality. It is almost as hard to find a smiling Christian on Good Friday as it is to find a "smiling Christ" in crucifixion art. In my memory, those of us who took Lent seriously, from Ash Wednesday's "dust thou art" to Holy Saturday's empty tomb and tabernacle, only confirmed Nietzsche's cutting critique about Christians: we "do not look redeemed."

III

Finally, a look at you: what now till Easter? I do not reject Jesus' injunction in today's Gospel: "Repent…" (Mk 1:15). However turned from sin you are, you stand in need of constant conversion, must keep turning to Christ. And those whose face is turned totally from him, any who need a radical conversion—it is not time for them to smile serenely. Their Lent is limpid: they give up sin. But I assume that you who gather here each Sunday are already on the road to Jerusalem with Jesus. To you I suggest a twin approach to these forty days: what a splendid spiritual writer has called "an asceticism of humor" and "a diaconate of humor."2

For yourself personally, individually, an asceticism of humor—fresh form of self-denial. A young lady once said to me: "Why are you so hard on yourself?" It was the only self-denial I knew: keep that rebellious flesh under control, and be intolerant of imperfection—mine and everyone else's! To you I am suggesting that you give up something sweeter than candy, smokier than Kents, perhaps more destructive than sin. I mean an absorption in yourself—where you take yourself all too seriously, where the days and nights rotate around *you*, your heartache and your hiatal hernia, your successes and failures, your problems and frustrations. For an asceticism of humor, you must distance yourself from yourself, see yourself in perspective, as you really are. I mean a creature wonderfully yet fearfully made, a bundle of paradoxes and contradictions. You believe and doubt, hope and despair, love and hate. You are exciting and boring, enchanted and disillusioned, manic and depressive. You are "cool" on the outside and you hurt within. You feel bad about feeling good,*3* are afraid of your joy, feel guilty if you don't feel guilty. You are trusting and suspicious, selfless and selfish, wide-open and locked in. You know so much and so little. You are honest and you still play games. Aristotle said you are a rational animal; I say you are an angel with an incredible capacity for beer!

If it is the incongruous, what does not fit, that makes for humor, you can indeed smile at yourself. So, let Christ the harlequin, the clown Christ, into your spiritual life: you are not laughing sacrilegiously at him; he is poking gentle fun at you—through tears.4 St. Ignatius Loyola has a rule for Jesuits: our "whose countenance should reflect cheerfulness rather than sadness…"5 If *we* don't obey Ignatius, you should!

And your smile will turn to lusty laughter if you only realize how lovable you are—not because of anything you have made of yourself, but because God loves you, because God died for you, because God lives in you… now.

But an asceticism of humor dare not remain a private joke. Humor, someone has said, good humor is basically looking at the world, at others, with eyes of love—being in love without restriction. An asceticism of humor must move out into a diaconate of humor: you deacon, you minister, the smiling Christ to others. I do not mean that you paint on a false smile or bellow forever with laughter. Simply that, with your new-found Christian delight in yourself, you go out to your brothers and sisters (even to your husband or wife!)—as you are, where they are.

Where they are…Not far from you is someone who is afraid and needs your courage; or lonely and needs your presence; or hurt and needs your healing. So many feel unloved and need your touching; are old and need to feel that you care. Many are weak in so many ways and need for support your own shared weakness. One of the most helpful words I ever spoke was to confess to a woman that I too had doubts about faith. "You?" she cried. "Oh, thank God!" You will rarely know greater happiness than when through you a smile is born on the face of someone in pain; you will have given birth to a smiling Christ.

Christianity needs men and women who repent of their smallness, fast from their selfishness, abstain from isolation. Lent calls for risen Christians, men and women like the hero of Eugene O'Neill's play *Lazarus Laughed* —the Lazarus who has tasted death and lees it for what it is, whose joy in living is irresistible, whose invitation to the world is his infectious cry:

Laugh with me!
Death is dead!
Fear is no more!
There is only life!
There is only laughter!6

Unreal? In a sense, yes—when you look at the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Southeast Asia; when you touch bellies bloated with hunger or shriveled from cancer. But where does the Christian start—start to overcome fear and death? Here, right where you are; now, not after Easter. By bringing the smiling Christ, the joy of Jesus, to one man, woman, or child reliving his passion. Who knows? It just might be your own healing, your own salvation.

At any rate, if the crucified Christ can look redeeming, the crucified Christian can at least look redeemed! For your Lenten penance, therefore, please… look… redeemed.

The Absence Of Christ

By Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ

Early in 1968 I was asked to preach at a Sunday liturgy j Georgetown University students, within a series of Lenten sermon by guest preachers. What precisely to talk about took much mulling Our country was at war; campuses were aflame, literally and figuratively. And still I hesitated to look in those directions. It was n simply that, in my twenty-second year of teaching seminarians Woodstock College in Maryland, I lived at a safe remove

from f bombs and bloody protests. Rather, I was persuaded that our your men and women of intelligence were growing up in a climate where a crisis even more basic than war and injustice confronted them, crisis that might well lie at the root of most others. In 1968, what, could a man or woman believe?
The question was far from academic; it arose from a pervasive doubt and cynicism, and it touched men and women wherever they lived, in everyday existence. Where do you find God? Where discover the face of Christ? I was convinced that theology and Teilhar had something pertinent to offer college students, might point them Godward, Christward.
As I read this sermon a decade later, it seems that the sari questions are being asked. We are no longer at war; it is hard t muster a covey of collegians for dramatic confrontation. But t1 1968 question has not vanished; the search for the Transcendent still agonizes us. Where do you look for God and His Christ?
Today is an age of crises. I mean an age of critical issues that agonize the human heart. There is the crisis of war: how much blood may a human being shed for justice' sake? There is the crisis o race: where dare a human being draw the color line? There is the crisis of sex: what may two human beings do in the name of love There is the crisis of poverty: how long must two fifths of the world go hungry? There is the crisis of religion: at what point doe a form of worship become heresy or idolatry?
War and peace, white and black, man and woman, rich an(poor, Catholic and Protestant-these are indeed critical issues. But I submit that at this moment in history there is a crisis more crucial, more basic, than any of these. The most critical issue of all is
not bombs, not skin, not morals, not food, not even church. It is the crisis of God. What can a human being believe? In the twentieth century, is belief still possible? And if it is, how do the man and
woman of today touch God? How does God touch them?

Interior to the crisis of God is the crisis of Christ. Not merely, what is he? How can the human mind grasp "God-man," divinity and humanity made one in the womb of a virgin? More critically, where is he? How can the whole person lay hold of him? Can I honestly say of him "There he is," as I can say of you "There you are"? Is he really present, or is it more honest to admit his "real absence"?
This afternoon I shall do three things briefly: (1) analyze the absence of Christ, (2) project the presence of Christ, (3) suggest the task of the intelligent Christian confronted by this paradox. More simply: I shall say, Christ is not here; I shall say, Christ is here; and I shall ask, where do you go from there?
I
First then, there is a genuine sense in which Christ is not here. He is not here as he was in Palestine. I do not see him as Mary did, bundled in straw. I do not reach for him as Peter did, walking on the waters. I do not speak to him as Dismas did, bleeding on the wood. I do not grasp him as Magdalene did, risen from the rock. I do not see the smile part his lips; I do not hear the thunder or the music of his voice; I do not trace his wounds with my finger. In that sense Christ is indeed absent.
, More than that: a whole generation of Christians has grown up, is still growing up-young men and women who do not sense the presence of Christ where I do-not at all or not so easily. There are youthful Christians who do not discover Christ in nature, do not experience him in the things they see and hear and touch, are insensitive to the insight of a poet like Plunkett:

I see his blood upon the rose,
the stars the glory of his eyes,
His body gleams amid eternal snows,

His tears fall from the skies.

Many a young Christian fails to find Christ in the preached word: I mean, in the proclamation of Scripture or the declamation of a preacher. A centuries-old Semitic text is ripped from context and flung into twentieth-century Washington, five minutes of unrelated moralizing are mingled with a spate of parochial announcements - and in some miraculous fashion the Lord is supposed to transpire. Understandably he does not.
Many a contemporary Christian fails to touch Christ in the liturgy, whether in the liturgical assembly or in the communion of hi flesh and blood. It may be that too often the gathered people c God are strangers, faces in a crowd, to all appearances joyless any loveless. It may be that for the sophisticated Catholic transubstantitian is too hard to swallow. Whatever the reason, too few Christians cam sing as lyrically as Aquinas:

Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore
Masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more,
See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.
Too few Christians find Christ in their fellow man. It is not that they find little to love in the poor and the black, in the slave and the starved, in the maim and the lame and the blind. Quite the contrary: the remarkable thing about today's young is their yearning to serve their brothers and sisters, the way they can live and love cry and die. But is it not man that emerges from all this? In what save some poetic sense is this Christ? What do the words of Chris really mean: "As long as you did it to one of these, you did it to me"? "Give him a cup of cold water, and you give it to me"? Some how what emerges from the streets of Selma and the shacks of Appalachia, from the vineyards of Delano and the paddy fields of Vietnam, is not the face of the risen Christ but the features of crucified man.
II
So them, there is a genuine problem here: the absence o Christ. He does not seem to be here. Neither from nature nor from the spoken word, neither from liturgy nor from living man, does the Lord of the living leap forth. Encounter with Christ is not easy. Is the experience even possible? The question leads logically into my second point. I say the experience is possible, because Christi, here. The absence is only apparent, the presence is real.
To grasp the paradox, I suggest that two remarkable sentence,, from Teilhard de Chardin's The Divine Milieu can be wonderfully helpful. The language is difficult, but the insight is glorious.

If we may alter a hallowed expression, we could say that the great mystery of Christianity is not exactly the appearance, but the transparence, of God in the universe. Yes, Lord, not only the ray that strikes the surface, but the ray that penetrates, not only Your Epiphany, Jesus, but Your Diaphany.
The point is: God's self-manifestation, Christ's disclosure of himself, does not modify the apparent order of things. Rain remains rain: precipitation has not been displaced by the tears of Jesus. The words of Scripture and of the preacher are still man-made symbols, feeble attempts to express an idea or vision that defies expression. The Eucharistic species contain after consecration the selfsame chemical constitution as before. And man remains man, with his hates and his loves, his laughter and his tears, his agony and his ecstasy.
In other words, what strikes the eye, the ear, the flesh, remains the same: a raindrop, a word, a loaf of bread, a human being. The new thing lies on a deeper level. It is, Teilhard says, like some translucent material: put a light within it and you illuminate the whole. So

too, he says,
the world appears to the Christian mystic bathed in an inward light which intensifies its relief, its structure and its depth. This light is not the superficial glimmer which can be realised in coarse enjoyment. Nor is it the violent flash which destroys objects and blinds our eyes. It is the calm and powerful radiance engendered by the synthesis of all the elements of the world in
Jesus.

The idea is deep and dense and difficult, but at bottom it simply expresses in breath-taking accents the omnipresence of Christ: he is everywhere. This is the thrilling Christian fact. With the coming of God in flesh, all creation was transformed, because it was given a new direction: Christward. St. Paul saw it-that breathless section in Romans, "We know that all of creation has been groaning together in travail until now" (Rom 8:22): nature itself shares the stress, the anxiety, the pain we ourselves feel as we wait for the promised redemption. The early Christian Fathers sensed it: for them, the world is so truly one whole that when the Son of God broke into it, simply everything took on a new dignity. Poets have glimpsed it: for Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." And even if "all wears man's smudge and shares man's smell,"
... for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.. . Because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
Teilhard grasped it with unparalleled richness-so much so that he could salute matter "charged with creative power, ocean turbulent with the Spirit, clay molded and animated by the Word Incarnate."
This is not an unchristian pantheism; it is an effort to take the Incarnation seriously. Since Bethlehem, not only man but all reality has been charged with the presence of Christ. But do not look for the face of Christ-this is sheer imagination. It is his energizing activity that charges the rainbow and the atom: with him and in him and through him the world is moving toward him.
Similarly for Scripture and the preached word. Christ is indeed there. But not an epiphany, a revelation from outside, on the surface of things: the face of Christ on the printed page, my lips suddenly the lips of Christ. This is not magic: read the Bible, and Christ will talk to you; listen to Burghardt, and your darkest doubts will disappear. There is something divinely dynamic about the word of God: it comes from Him and it speaks of Him; His breath warms the cold syllables. But there is no real presence of Christ in the word of God without your response to it. And this response is impossible unless Christ is already present within you: I mean, active in you, energizing you. Remember the chilling words of Christ to those Jews who did not believe him when he spoke the truth to them: "He who is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God" (Jn 9:47).
In like manner for the liturgy. Christ is indeed here. In your gathering together: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Beneath the consecrated species: "This is my body; this is my blood." But once again, there is no automatic epiphany of Christ on the face of your classmate or your fascinating date, in the texture of the bread or the sparkle of the wine. The Christ who is in them becomes translucent through the Christ who is in you-through the faith and hope and love which themselves bear eloquent witness to the potent presence of Christ within you.
So too for your brothers and sisters-those who share your commitment to Christ and those who reject it, those for whom life is intoxicating laughter and those for whom life is a burden almost too heavy to endure. Christ is indeed there, in all of them, in each of them. As Vatican II put it, "by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some

fashion with every man." Christ is there. But not some surface epiphany-the face of Christ suddenly superimposed on LBJ or Martin Luther King. The Christ in every man will become translucent, will come through to you, on one condition: that your faith and your love are strong enough to light up the Christ who is profoundly there-there by his love, by his concern, by his ceaseless activity, there in every human yearning for bread or peace, for justice or freedom, for life or love.

III

Apparent absence, real presence. My third point: where do you go from there? First, a twin realization. On the one hand, the search for Christ is extraordinarily difficult, because so much depends on my faith and my love. On the other hand, encounter with Christ is possible, simply because he surrounds me, to be encountered everywhere and in everyone, ready to reveal himself to faith and to love. Here Teilhard is superb:

In our hands, in the hands of all of us, the world and life (our world, our life) are placed like a Host, ready to be charged with the divine influence, that is to say with a real Presence of the Incarnate Word. The mystery will be accomplished. But on one condition: which is that we shall believe that this has the will and the power to become for us the action-that is to say the prolongation of the Body of Christ. If we believe, then everything is illuminated and takes shape around us: chance is seen to be order, success assumes an incorruptible plenitude, 'suffering becomes a visit and a caress of God....

Secondly, if you commit yourself intelligently to this search, you will find yourself increasingly sensitive to four tangible aspects of your relationship to God in Christ: (1) You will find yourself absorbed by a living presence, a divine activity more real than your physical surroundings. (2) You will be aware of a holy presence that fills you with awe and fear, the while it warms and draws you - what Mouroux called "a kind of rhythm between hope and fear, each mutually supporting and generating the other." (3) You will know an inexpressible loneliness; for in the presence of Love, you will still be far from Love, agonizingly aware that to find yourself you must lose yourself, to grasp God you must risk all. (4) Even within sorrow you will sense a profound joy, strong and unshakable, a joy that will not be imprisoned but must burst forth to be shared with others. This will be real presence, because this will be shared love.

You Are Dust

By Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ

Lent is something of a paradox, a seeming contradiction. One part of the paradox protrudes today. When I cross your head with ashes, one of the formulas the Church recommends is: "Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return." That body of yours, man, that body you pamper with pizza and Pabst, that's gonna crumble, man; you'd better believe it, and start making with the tears. And yet, during next Sunday's liturgy, the priest will open the Preface with: "Father, all-powerful and ever-living God, ... each year you give us this joyful season." This joyful season. Well, which is it to be? Will the real Lent kindly emerge from the closet? Are you supposed to weep and mourn with the prophet Joel or give ear to Jesus, douse your face with Dove, slap on some Brut or Chanel N, 5, and come out smelling like Joe Namath or Brooke Shields?

The paradox is real, but you do not solve it with an either/or, by eliminating one panel of

the paradox. As with any good paradox, so with the paradox that is Lent: The solution is a both/and. Both sorrow and joy; tears and laughter. In a word, the paschal mystery: dying/rising, intertwined. Let's see how it works out, by plumbing the twin symbols on your forehead: dust and the sign of the cross.

I

The first symbol: dust. The formula stems from Genesis, God's judgment on humanity after His first human images have rejected Him: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19). It's an image that dots the Old Testament: the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Job. Even Abraham, "father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:4), pleads with the Lord for Sodom from the stance of Adam: "I who am but dust and ashes" (Gen 18:27).

But what does the symbol symbolize? What does dust say to us? With his uncommon insight, the German theologian Karl Rahner phrased it starkly:

Dust ... is the image of the commonplace. There is always more than enough of it. One fleck is as good as the next. Dust is the image of anonymity: one fleck is like the next, and all are nameless.

It is the symbol of indifference: what does it matter whether it is this dust or that dust? It is all the same. Dust is the symbol of nothingness: because it lies around so loosely, it is easily stirred up, it blows around blindly, is stepped upon and crushed-and nobody notices. It is a nothing that is just enough to be-a nothing. Dust is the symbol of coming to nothing: it has no content, no form, no shape; it blows away, the empty, indifferent, colorless, aimless, unstable booty of senseless change, to be found everywhere, and nowhere at home.

Now precisely this is what God says to me: "You are dust." It is not the only thing God says to me; He does not say I am only dust. What else He says we shall see shortly. But to understand what else He says, to grasp it in all its glory, I have to accept, experience, endure the dust I am. Like dust, I'm commonplace. I'm ordinary. I'm Scripture's blade of grass, puff of wind. I'm a speck in the universe. I'm one of uncounted billions who have blown about this planet. If a handful of people see me as different-keen mind, rich voice, deep tan-a billion Chinese have never heard my name. And if they did hear it, they couldn't care less.

Each day I experience my dust. From the moment I struggled from my mother's flesh, I've been in process of dying. I'm a creature of pain: From adolescent acne through malignant growth to senile forgetfulness, I sense how near to nothing I am. I'm a creature of sin: not always sinning but blowing hot and cold, dreadfully small, wrapt in the straitjacket of my selfishness, desperately far from the God I ought to love above life itself. I'm so anxious, so perplexed: about myself, about people, about life-frequently losing my way, often adrift like the dust I cannot capture.

Is it any wonder that, for all too many, despair is just around the corner? Little wonder the French novelist Georges Bernanos could say it is not easy for man not to hate himself.

II

Pretty grim, isn't it? Only if you stop there; only if you stop with the symbol that is dust. But that symbol is incomplete. When I dust your forehead, I dust it with another symbol: the sign of the cross. And that symbol declares that dust has been redeemed. Redeemed not in some shadowy sense but with startling realism. The sign of the cross tells us that, in taking flesh, the Son of God became dust, that save for sin his dust was the same as ours.

It tells us that, in an outrageous reversal, we can say to God's Son what God told us in Paradise: "You are dust and to dust you will return." His dust was as short-lived, as fleeting, as ours. For a few brief years his feet scuffed the dust of Palestine; his sweat bloodied the dust of Gethsemane; with a last loud cry his body joined ours in the dust of death.

Precisely here is the bone and marrow of our belief; here joy transmutes sorrow, ecstasy weds pain, as nowhere else in history. When God's Son became the dust we are and nailed it to a cross, God's judgment "You are dust" was transformed. I do not mean that you cease to be dust. You will always be men and women of flesh and blood. You can expect to experience in every fiber of your being the anguish, the tears, the daily dying, the sense of nothingness that fragile dust can never quite escape. The new thing, the redeeming feature, is that the Son of God experienced every bit of that-for us. And so, ever since Bethlehem and Calvary, this speck of humanity that is you, this is now "charged with the grandeur of God." You are brothers and sisters of God-in-flesh. Your dust is literally electric with God's own life; your nothingness is filled with God's eternity. Your nothingness has Christ's own shape.

With this new shape, the sentence "You are dust and to dust you will return" ought no longer terrify us. We no longer have to despair at our ceaseless downward movement to death. Of course we shall die;, and I, for one, am not anxious to die-I love this life with a passion that is perhaps unchristian. But the sign of the cross cries to us that death is not the end of our dust. The cross is indeed a sign. It signifies what Paul proclaimed without ceasing: "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through His Spirit which dwells in you" (Rom 8:11).

So then, back to our original question. Is Lent for laughter or for tears? Lent is for laughter and for tears. Lent plays out, in memory and in symbol, what the whole of Christian living is all about. It is a dying/rising. Not simply at the end of your days; all your days. On the one hand, you must journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. It is 'a journey that mingles gladness and sadness, satisfaction and frustration, high hopes and sometimes near despair. On the other hand, you walk that dusty journey with Jesus, and you walk it as risen Christians/ You don't wait for Easter to rise with Christ; you don't wait for your very last death. You have risen! From the moment that water flowed over your forehead in the shape of a cross, the life of the risen Christ has been thrilling through your dust like another bloodstream. You can be incredibly alive-if you will only let yourself feel that life, live it.

For your Lenten penance, therefore, force yourself to come alive-alive in Christ. Focus on those twin symbols. When you leave here to continue your journey to Jerusalem, wear those symbols with awareness, with pride, with hope, with love. Even when the dust disappears, remember the reality: Remember, man/woman, remember that you are dust-dust redeemed by a cross.

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