

Reflection for Ash Wednesday & Lent

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In December of 2006, I enjoyed the privilege of taking a group of youth to the Nightwatch program at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. On given weekends throughout the year, youth from around the country come to the Cathedral Friday night and stay through Sunday morning to learn about Christian faith and life and the Episcopal Church through the amazing space that is the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, one of the largest cathedrals in the world and the largest indoor space in New York City after Madison Square Garden. The special privilege of my visit lay in the fact that the Cathedral was recovering from a terrible fire some years earlier, and the staff of the Nightwatch program took that as an opportunity to teach us something that I always remember on Ash Wednesday.

It was December of 2001, and the fire alarms blared through the night: the Cathedral was on fire. As staff members heard of the fire on TV and radio, they rushed to the site, fearful of the fate of the building they love. This was only a few months after 9/11, and they anxiously wondered if this was another attack on the city. But it wasn't. Faulty wiring in a gift shop stocked full of goods for the holiday season set off a fierce, smoking conflagration, and the Cathedral filled with smoke, from the floor to the ceiling hundreds of feet above, and across the 600+ yard space from the Rose Window to the high altar. New York's Bravest kept the fire from spreading to the Cathedral proper and put it out after many hours of battle, but the smoke went everywhere, leaving soot and ash on everything.

Medieval tapestries could be sent out for special care and cleaning. Stone floors and walls could be scrubbed clean. But all around the altar were delicate stone and marble carvings: statues that relate the sacred history of the church, bas relief quotes proclaiming the Gospel, patterns of interwoven beauty in latticework. These things could not be scrubbed clean, for doing so would destroy the delicate artistry with which they were made. So what did they do?

A special cleaning process was undertaken: crews sprayed the carvings with a chemical that in a short time solidified into a gel around the carved artistry. The gel wrapped around the faces and bodies of saints, delicately covered words from the Scriptures, and flowed with curves and lines of carved patterns of grace and beauty. And then, the crews gently pulled the gel away. As they did so, the dirt and ash and soot that had sullied the carvings came away, revealing the stone work as they looked when first made. Sometimes it took multiple sprays and peels to remove all the ash and dirt, but as the process was gentle, the delicate beauty was preserved.

This is now how I think of Ash Wednesday and Lent. The Church extends an invitation to us to keep a Holy Lent of Christian discipline and practice for a season as we prepare for Holy Week and Easter. This is not a time to do violence to ourselves, to scrub away all the sin from our

souls. No, we, like the stone carvings at the Cathedral, are delicate and beautiful things, not to be scrubbed violently. Instead, our Lenten practice and discipline should be like that chemical spray, delicately covering every aspect of our lives with prayerful awareness. Our Lenten discipline should be a time of self-examination and devoted prayer and loving service as we consider how we are living, how well or poorly we are manifesting our love for God and for others in our choices and actions, in our thoughts and feelings.

Lent should be a time of repentance and renewal, where we collaborate with God in the work of revealing the delicate, beautiful creatures that we are, made by God in love and joy and for love and joy. So pray, read, study, and serve this Lent, and let your practice pull away the things that are not loving, not caring, not of the Spirit of Christ. Then come Easter, you will stand clean and lovely in the light of that Resurrection morning, and be free to rejoice in God's love for you!