

Ash Wednesday Fire and Smoke

by Joseph Schaefer

Ash Wednesday is a time to prepare for Easter by giving up something, by renouncing some fault, by performing some good work as a way to start the Lenten Season and prepare for Easter. One year back in the mid 70's, the liturgy committee asked the parishioners to bring to the Ash Wednesday service some short word or phrase written on a small scrap of paper that would symbolize their Lenten work. They could also bring any palm from Palm Sunday the year before.

When they arrived they were instructed to bring the papers and palm forward and deposit them in a large iron caldron located in the center of the worship space. We would burn these items to get the ashes which would mark our foreheads during the service, a way to personalize the meaning of Lent. All went as planned and the modest contents in the caldron were prayed over and then set aflame. All went well for the first few minutes, but then, unexpectedly, instead of a modest fire, thick black smoke billowed from the cauldron. The flame remained very small and under control, but the heavy smoke billowed up and across the ceiling of the worship space. The ministers and ushers looked on in mounting concern. Some wondered if the fire department should be called. Congregants began to cough. But to our relief, the smoke quickly subsided and the flames burned out and a sigh of relief went through the congregation.

A blessing was said over the ashes which were then distributed to everyone, a reminder of our blessings, our sins and an unforgettable way to begin the Lenten season.