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A Year of the Cross

An Ash Wednesday Reflection by Bishop McConnell



Ash Wednesday 2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

It has been a year of the Cross: Covid, racial violence, the election and its aftermath. In America, we have had more death and sorrow, more fear and anxiety, than we could reasonably expect to bear. Our confidence that certain ideas, certain institutions — though flawed — are unshakeable, has been shattered. Our trust of one another is at a new low. For any number of reasons, any one of us can sympathize with Jesus in his last hour, when *all forsook him and fled (Mark 14:50)*.

After a year of the Cross, we now enter a season of the Cross, our second Lent in a pandemic.

I admit: I struggle with this. So many I know are worn out, beaten down, grieving. Even with the vaccine in sight — or with one dose in their arms — they wonder if they can make it to the end, or if there will even be an end. They echo the Psalmist: *how long, O Lord? Wilt Thou be angry with us forever? (Ps. 79:5)* How long, the plague, the racism, the fractures across our land? How long, the heartbreak of the world, which it is the solemn calling of the Church to share?

No sooner is the question asked, than the answer comes. The answer to a year of the Cross...

...is the Cross.

When we consider this, it is hard to exaggerate how great a gift this Lent will be, forty days of grace, shaped by all we have become, all we have been reduced to. It is easier to repent when you are already on your knees. It is easier to fast when you can't remember the last time you ate with friends. It is easier to pray when, every morning for a year, you have begged God to protect those you love.

Above all, it is easier to remember who has the last word: this Jesus Christ, who is the Last Word. It is easier to remember that His last word on the Cross is also ours: *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit (Luke 23:46)*. We who are of little faith, uncertain, hurt and worried, lean on his sacrifice, His faith, hope and love. He brings us with Him into the presence of the Father — *ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven*.

We have forty days to learn this mystery more deeply, and a lifetime to share it with the world, the only mystery that can change the world, bring true justice and enduring peace. Forty days that begin today.

So, let us begin, and continue, one day at a time, in the disciplines we know: repent, pray, fast, and serve the world for which Christ died. Be urgent for His love, impatient for His justice, and hopeful for His kingdom. And as you see the signs of that Kingdom break out before you, give God the glory, and share the news with anyone you can!

Yours in the love of Christ Crucified,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Dorsey', with a small cross symbol above the first letter.

(The Right Reverend) Dorsey W. M. McConnell, D.D.
VIII Bishop of Pittsburgh

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