

A-Ash Wednesday March 1, 2017

It is good to be home from Guatemala. It was a great week. There is so much to tell you but most will have to wait for another time but I thought it noteworthy that for the whole week before Lent, **we were marked by ashes.**

Our mission group built two cinderblock homes for Mayan families in the village of San Antonio, which sits on a hillside, in the shadow of the volcano named *Agua*, meaning “water”.

This volcano frequently belched smoke over the countryside so the soil was rich in the black ash.

Everything was covered in a fine black dust.

By the end of each day our clothes and skin were filthy, partly because the wind was dusty and partly because of mishaps on the job site.

I learned that I don't have the grace and strength that I did 4 years ago. On the first day, the ground gave way beneath my feet and I slipped into the foundation hole and came up covered in black ashy soil.

On another day I felt my foot twist in a hole in the uneven ground. I realized I was going to fall forward into the wet cement or backward into the cold ashes of their cook stove. I landed on the cook stove.

My work clothes were stained with black ash for the rest of the week.

My mantra became, “*another day, another hole.*”

Living in the shadow of a volcano is not an easy life.

A large eruption can mean death.

In 1541 a debris and mud flow from *Agua* destroyed the original capital of Guatemala and the capital was moved to Antigua.

Pam Garman told us that a few years ago a village was temporarily evacuated when *Agua* belched clouds of ash, making it hard to see and breath.

However, we also learned that volcanic ash can support life. Though it is obviously not nutrient rich, the ash weathers quickly into a loose clay that holds water to support plants during the dry season. Tropical plants thrive in this type of soil.

Addis Hilliker met an organic farmer in the *tienda* next to our worksite.

He invited us to visit his land and we did.

Behind a fence of rusty corrugated steel he had a secret garden.

He was growing coffee, edible flowers, arugula, tomatoes, peppers, many varieties of herbs. These are all sold at market.

The weathered ash and clay had produced lush and green plant life which in turn meant a new and better life for a poor Guatemalan farmer.

Today, Ash Wednesday.

In a few minutes we too will be marked by ashes.

Ashes are a sign of our frailty and our mortality.

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

They are an external sign of public penitence, a way to say we know who we are, sinners—beggars before God and we know our need for a loving, forgiving, life-giving God.

Ashes are also a sign of cleansing and renewal. In early years, soap was made from ashes and farmers would burn their fields to renew them.

Our theme this Lent is **Stumbling in the Shadows; Dancing in the Light.**

Today/tonight, as we each receive a cross of ash on our forehead as a reminder that we too walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But we fear no evil.

God is with us along the way; where there is a shadow there is the promise of a sun, for us that light is Jesus Christ.

Jesus died so that we might have life.

By His sacrifice we are forgiven

By His grace we are saved.

By His wounds we are healed.

This is the good news of Ash Wednesday.

Let us now take a moment of silence to listen deeply to God's call to a deeper faith

*Silence*

## INVITATION TO LENT

Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting.

Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. The whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.  
(bcponline.org/SpecialDays/ashwed.html)

**In response to this invitation, please turn to page 5 of your bulletin and Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.** *Go to bulletin*