

Pope Francis, in his homily for Ash Wednesday (last year) wrote that “what counts is not appearance; the value of life does not depend on the approval of others or on success, but on what we have within.”

That is the message of today’s gospel. If we take care of what is within ourselves, what happens externally will be grace, not showmanship.

It is also a warning about blowing our own trumpet instead of looking after those less fortunate than ourselves. It is to see that person the world shuns that only God sees and the hope is that we will see her or him.

Lent ask us to take that step beyond ourselves for that of our brother or sister, to fast from our own needs for those of our brothers and sisters.

This gospel for Ash Wednesday raises two practical questions regarding Lenten observance. The first question is: Should not our Lenten practices be private, in secret, and known only to God? The gospel says, “Keep your deeds of mercy secret; go to your room and pray in private; fast so that no one can see that you are fasting.” I mean it is a little puzzling when we throw ashes on our heads for all to see!

But this verse must be balanced with another gospel verse, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds, and give glory to God.”

So the core message is deeper. This gospel is primarily about the motive for our praying, fasting, and charity, not about their visibility to others. Hopefully the ashes we will wear proudly as a sign of our love and devotion for God. It should also humble us, not exalt.

The key words in this gospel are “to win the praise of others.” We are warned about seeking everything for ourselves, looking for approval or being popular. As the commercial says, “Don’t be that cable guy.”

The ashes are also a reminder that we are mortal. “Remember you are dust and dust you shall return.” Is a rather sobering statement to those who wish to avoid the reality of the day that we will one day, die.

The shock of “non-being” brings “being” to awareness. In the consciousness that we will not always be in this life in the way we presently are, we realize what a gift we have been given. Not only for all the blessings within life but for the very fact of life itself.

The second practical question is related to the first: “Why are we doing what we are doing? Some say, “I’m giving up foul language for Lent.” Good. Giving up sin for a while and start up again later! Not the right motivation!

Some people would like to lose weight, stop smoking, or curb their drinking, and when Lent comes they think, “Why not use the occasion of Lent to achieve these goals? Going to work those hips. Drop those pounds and be looking good@” Sounds a little like a New Year resolution than Lent (:

One has to wonder if perhaps one is using Lent rather than observing Lent. “Is it right to have our Lenten spiritual observance help us to achieve personal physical goals?” The answer is similar to that of that first question.

Yes, it is good and honorable to use the occasion of Lent to improve the condition of our bodies as well as our souls. Primarily, however, we fast to get that soul into shape and it also witnesses our unity with those who hunger each day of their lives.

Yes, “Be on guard against performing religious acts for people to see.” However, “Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and give glory to God.”