

Ash Wednesday ~ March 9, 2011
Homily ~7 p.m. Liturgy

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St. John the Evangelist Parish
Davison, Michigan

There is a story about an infant named Eric. At his baptism, as his mother held him in her arms, Father anointed him with sacred chrism, tracing the Cross of Christ on Eric's forehead.

Following the baptism, Eric's family celebrated with a big backyard party. Family and friends ate burgers and chips and played volleyball under the summer sun. Eric, being only six months old, was left to nap in his backyard stroller. When mom got him up, whoops! Basted on Eric's forehead was the image of the cross. The oil that Father had traced on his forehead acted the opposite of a sun screen. The Cross of Christ was imprinted on Eric's forehead. For several weeks, until it completely disappeared, that cross was a wonderful reminder as to the meaning of baptism and a reminder that the Cross of Jesus was "written" upon Eric's forehead.

And what a powerful witness it was. Eric's mom and dad had to explain the cross to the pediatrician, to the neighbors, to the cashier at the grocery store. For a few weeks, Eric was nothing less than a living children's sermon. It was only a bit of sunburn, but what a great sign to be marked with—the Cross of Christ. That cross is to be the foundation of that child's life.

If I read the Book of Joel right, God's desire is not that we wear a cross on our forehead, but that it is marked on our hearts. "*Rend your hearts, not your garments,*" says Joel in today's reading. That's much harder to do, isn't it? It's much easier to rend your clothes than to rend your heart. It is much easier to wear a cross around your neck than it is to bear it daily in everything you do.

Just a few years back we witnessed a bloody conflict in the Balkans between the Christians and the Muslims. One of the most notorious killers of Muslims was a man by the name of Arkan. When being interviewed on the BBC, Arkan pulled open his chest to expose a large cross on his chest. "See," he said, "I am a Christian."


A large cross on your chest does not make you a follower of Jesus. It's much easier to wear your piety outwardly than it is to love God and love your neighbor in the privacy of your own heart. No wonder Jesus counseled, "*And when you pray,*

do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that others may see them. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full."

And so we approach this day with caution. This is not a day for a showy kind of religion. It is a day for focusing on the inner meaning of our lives in the light of the Cross of Jesus Christ.

And so, as we put the cross on our foreheads, we hope that God will baste it on our heart so that somehow we may live as Christ lived.

∞140th Jubilee ∞

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