


## ...in Ash Wednesday



back from sin and toward God? We go because we need to go, because at least once a year we need to be reminded that our deepest hunger is the hunger for God.

**T**he black ash is wet and cold. A practiced thumb stamps us with two intersecting lines of burnt palms from last year. Those gathered at Mass walk back up the aisle to their places as we await the dismissal. Looking around, I see so many faces: young, old, teens, mothers, fathers, and single people. Some faces I recognize from Sunday Mass; some faces I don't recognize. We join in singing the recessional hymn as Father progresses slowly toward the doors of the church.

Then we go out into the morning air to start our day, marked with the sign of Christ. School and work will begin now that this liturgy is over, and the black marks on our foreheads will be a cause for discussion, for double takes, and for witness.

### So Lent begins.

Every year in the middle of a week in late winter we go to Church and have the ashes smudged upon our clean foreheads. Every year the churches are filled to overflowing with the regulars and the not-so-regulars. Why do we still undergo this ritual of ashes that is centuries old, as old as the prophets who pleaded with God's people to turn

Lent is a gift that the Church in her wisdom celebrates every year. It is a gift of time, a gift of contemplation, and a gift of quiet so that we may listen to the Word, who whispers to us to come back to the God who created us. It encourages us to turn away from the noise and over-indulged appetites so that we may understand the hunger that can be filled—with the grace of God—only by prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor.

---

**"...our deepest hunger is the hunger for God."**

---

So we go to our parish churches once a year to have crosses signed upon our faces. It is in this same manner that, when the Gospel is proclaimed, we take our right thumbs, trace three crosses, and pray: may the word of God be in my mind, on my lips, and in my heart. The prayer of the whole Church, the Body of Christ, is that each year the sign of the cross penetrates a little deeper and moves us toward fuller conversion toward the light of Christ.

*Julianne B. McCullagh is Director of Family Life Ministry at St. Philip the Apostle Church in Lewisville, Texas. She writes the weekly column The Family Life Corner.*