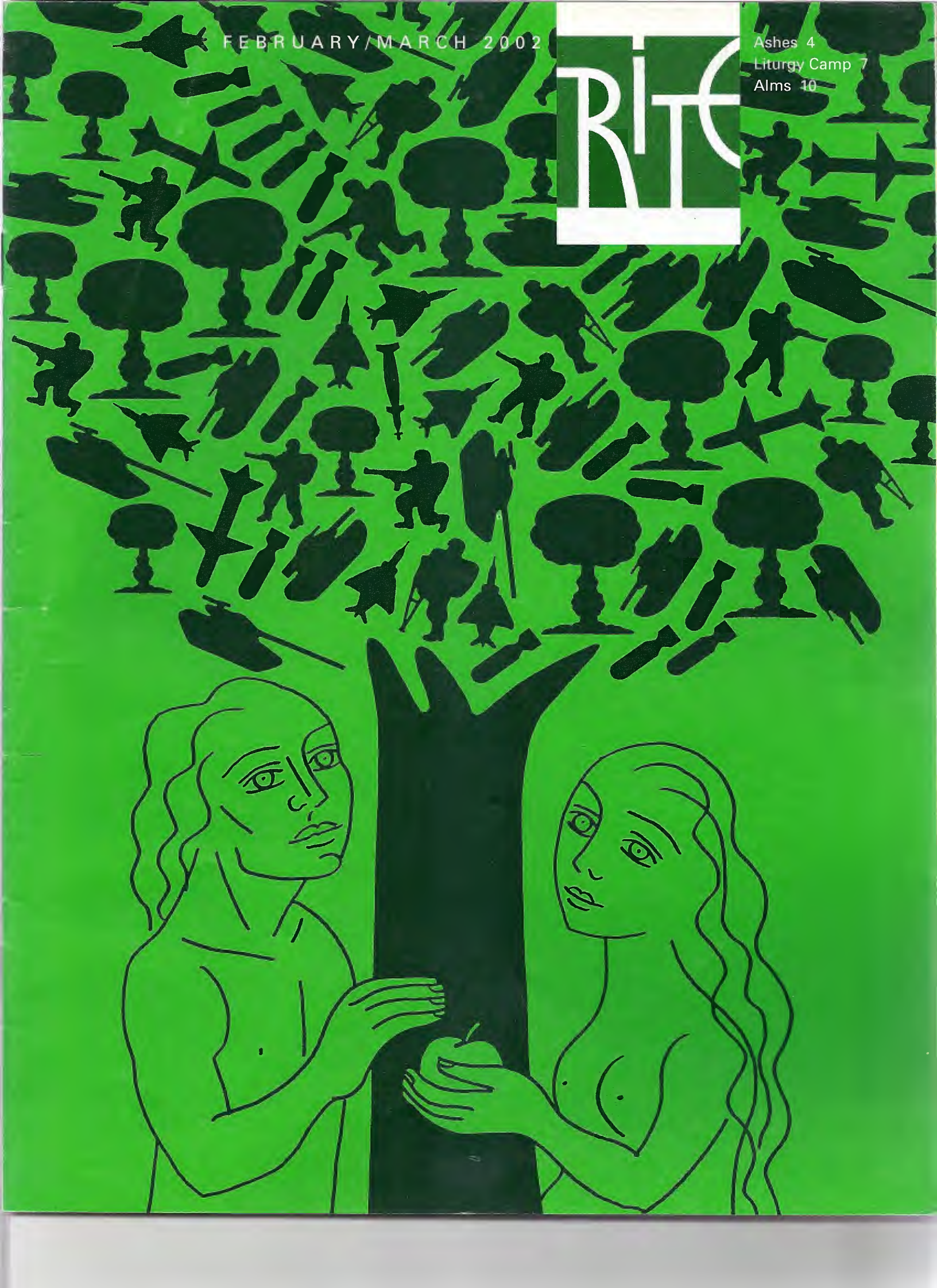


FEBRUARY/MARCH 2002

RITC

Ashes 4
Liturgy Camp 7
Alms 10



Buy—or Make Your Own—Ashes?

Ash Wednesday. We all are familiar with standing in line to be blessed with ashes, as we reluctantly begin yet another Lenten season, and seeing the tell tale smudge upon the foreheads of those we meet in the supermarket or in the mall who have also been to services that day.

While it is not a holy day of obligation, it is still one of those days that Catholics who seldom attend services show up in droves. Perhaps that is because of the very truth of this ancient ritual, as people recognize that there are things in their lives for which they need to do penance, of their need to return to God. The idea of rubbing

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one with ashes as a sign of penitence or mourning is evident beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures (for example, Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:19, Mordecai in Esther 4 or Job in Job 2:8) and in the gospels of Matthew and Luke (for example, Luke 10:13). In the early church, one who was making penance would wear a hair shirt and mark himself or herself with ashes as a sign of their mortification, and to ask others to pray for them. Initially these periods were only a few days, but through the centuries this period stretched into weeks.

Early Gallican rites showed the bishop strewing ashes on the floor in the shape of a cross or the Greek letter "chi", (X for Christ).¹ In the late 900s, Ælfrec, the abbot of Eynsham wrote, "In the books both in the Old Law and in the New that those who repented of their sins bestrewed themselves with ashes and clothed their bodies with sackcloth. Now let us do this little at the beginning of our Lent

A Reflection on Ashes

Beside the font of water
Rests a large bowl of ashes.
In my mind's eye I run to it
And grab the ashes—
Throwing them all over my body and screaming,
"I am dust, I am dust, I am dust!"
I tell you of my dirt and my envy and my shame.

But even desolation eludes me
As I again take my focus from my ashen self
And return to the font of water.
It is so much larger, it can cleanse any ash.

The mindflash is over, and
I have not moved from my corner.
Yet, I am weary, slightly smudged,
And I am somehow at ease in my
Uneasiness—
Finding perspective
And keeping you in sight.

—Jill Maria Murdy

that we strew ashes upon our heads to signify that we ought to repent of our sins during the Lenten fast."²

A century later, in 1091, Pope Urban II decreed that ashes be imposed on all the faithful.³ Hence, the *dies cinerum* (day of ashes)⁴ came to be. It cannot be ascertained just when the ashes imposed became the ashes of palms, though Palm Sunday itself is a much older tradition, with records dating back to 386 when the Spanish nun Egeria made her pilgrimage to Jerusalem⁵, and witnessed the children in procession with palms at the holy city.

■ Burning Palms

It is easy enough for a parish to order their ashes from a Catholic supply company, in which case they come in a bag or a box, evenly black, and finely ground, prepared for distribution. And yet there is another richer, albeit messier alternative. A parish could burn palms from the last year and use those ashes for distribution. This has often been the lonely task of the sacristan, but I propose that it could be a communal celebration. We have been practicing this in our monastery for a number of years. There is something very powerful about all of us bringing the palms that we waved and sang "Hosanna" with, but a short time ago, as if to say, "O God, we come to you again, with our hopes and praises, and with our failed attempts."

The service itself is very simple. We have a large cast-iron pan placed in a fireplace. When all are gathered together, there is an opening prayer, and then everyone is invited to bring forth their palm and cast it into the burning bowl. Meanwhile, Psalm 130 is prayed. Additional psalms or

BURNING OF PALMS RITUAL

Sacred Heart Monastery

All gather around the fireplace, each with a piece of last year's palm in hand. The palms will be burned and the ashes will be used for Ash Wednesday.

Presider: As we gather together today, let us prepare our minds and hearts; that we may enter into the days of Lent.

(pause)

May God be with you.

All: And also with you.

Presider: Hosanna! Hosanna! We sang, as we waved our palm branches in procession, offering praise and thanks to Jesus, in honor of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Passion Sunday last year. Then we witnessed his passion, journeying beside him to the cross, and came to his tomb on Easter morning. Alleluia, Christ is risen! We rejoiced.

We placed these blessed palms in our bedrooms and dining rooms, and in our bibles and the visors of our automobiles, as a way to remind us throughout the year of our journey with Jesus. We too are called to walk the paschal journey, "to share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in the Eternal Presence" (*Rule of Benedict*, Prologue).

We recognize that another year has passed as we prepare for Lent, and eventually the joy of another Easter. As we burn the palms, we note the shortness of our lives, that they are as fragile as the palm branches, and that we too shall return to ashes. Yet we are graced with the hope, with the promise of eternal life that is bestowed on all of God's children. Help us, O God, to be faithful to you, to begin again, to continue on our journey towards you. Jesus, guide us in our Lenten passage.

The presider and then all present place into the pot the palm branch that each is holding.

Psalm 137 is sung, or recited.

All watch in silence as the palms burn.

Presider: Creator God,
just as you called forth Adam and Eve
from the dust of earth,
you have called us each by name,
and claimed us in the waters of baptism.



Merciful God, we are yours in Christ Jesus.

As we prepare to begin the 40 days
of prayer, fasting and almsgiving,
look upon us with your love.

Quench the longing in our heart that only you can fill.
As we fast and pray for justice and peace in the world;
for goodness and love in our hearts;
we seek to praise you more and more.

Consecrate our every desire to you, O God.

We ask this in the loving name of Jesus,
who proclaimed your love forever and ever
by his death upon a cross.

All: Amen.

Presider: Through the power of the cross, we have been claimed for Christ. In this Christ, we find forgiveness, peace, and mercy. Guide our steps, O God, in mercy and love.

All sing "O God, our help in ages past" as the assembly is sprinkled with holy water. The rite ends in silence after the hymn.

Egeria's Travels

To read about Egeria's Holy Week experience in Jerusalem online see:

<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/durham/egetra.html>
<http://198.62.75.1/www1/jhs/TSspeger.html>

hymns that would be appropriate include Psalm 37, Psalm 90, Psalm 102, 2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2 or Philippians 2: 3–11. Owen Alstott's "To You O Lord" (OCP) is a sung text of Psalm 25 that strikes the right balance between penitence and hopefulness. "O God Our Help in Ages Past", which is a metrical sung text of Psalm 90 could be done *a capella*, or a simple Taizé response would be great too. Another option would be to allow the palms to burn in silence.

Somehow it brings alive the text, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," when one sees the palms burn so quickly. The prayer service could end with another hymn, or a blessing and solemn departure in silence, leaving those participants mindful of Lent.

While this format has been very powerful for us, there could be many variations. Perhaps in a parish situation, it might be easier to have the palms placed in the bowl before it is lit, for safety and liability sake. Or, weather permitting, an outside service may be more appropriate. Individual circumstances would need to be the judge of that. Some have used new trashcans to burn the palms, and other parishes have gone the make shift hibachi route. Whatever avenue you should pursue, it would seem important to differentiate between this and the Easter fire, so as to not diminish the primary importance of the new fire at the Vigil.

Maybe the burning of palms could be a prayer service combined with a pre-Lenten day of prayer, or a religious education class, held after a parish Mardi Gras party, or after daily Mass. (But if you've never burned palms before, you might not want to wait until the day before Ash Wednesday.)

Don't be discouraged if you don't get a large attendance the first year. This could be a tradition that takes a bit of time to build, as your congregation gets used to bringing their palms for the service. Advanced planning, education, and promotion are necessary to make this work in a parish. For example, you might begin on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord to collect palms. Put notices in the church bulletin. People can either bring the palms with them to the service or all parishioners—even those who might not come to the service—can deposit them in suitable containers that you place in the narthex or at the doors. If you chose the first option—people bringing their own palms at the time of the service, maybe the

More Examples

To see a few other parish's online records of their burning ceremonies, visit:

<http://www.bayou.com/~stthomas/ShroveTuesday.html>
<http://www.semimissourian.com/photogallery/week/010226/show.html?ash>
<http://www.toad.net/~stpeters/sermons/Ash%20Wednesday%202001.htm>

extra palms that the parish had left from last Palm Sunday could be made available for those who come to the celebration but forgot palms or didn't have any, so that these individuals could still be active participants.

■ Preparing the Ashes

Now that the palms have been burned and you have ashes, things get a little messy. (Did I say a little? I meant a lot!) Leave plenty of time for the ashes and the pot to cool completely before attempting to collect them. We always try and garner some of the ashes that have still maintained the palm structure and texture and place them in a ceramic bowl as part of Lent's environment. They serve as a powerful reminder of the season.

The rest you will want to gather and perhaps pulverize a bit more fine. They are not as black as the ashes that are traditionally purchased, but more of a natural gray. They do work well in their natural state, it just may take a bit more holy water to be mixed with them to make them stick well when they are distributed.

Perhaps this seems like just one more thing at an already busy time in the church year. For some people, who did not attend the burning of the palms, Ash Wednesday will continue in its own faithful tradition, but for those who have experienced both services, they will be richly rewarded. They are more likely to recall the ashes and burning throughout the Lenten days.

NOTES

1. Mc Donald, William J. ed. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America 1967) "Ash Wednesday," by E. J. Johnson.
2. From the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, copyright © 1913 by the Encyclopedia Press, Inc. Electronic version copyright © 1996 by New Advent, Inc. "Ash Wednesday," by Herbert Thurston. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01775b.htm>
3. Fink, Peter J. ed. *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 1990.) "Lent" by Lizette Larson-Miller.
4. From the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, copyright © 1913 by the Encyclopedia Press, Inc. Electronic version copyright © 1996 by New Advent, Inc. "Ash Wednesday," by Herbert Thurston. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01775b.htm>
5. Gingras, George E., ed., *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, (New York: Newman Press 1970), 104.

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