

Affirming Identity through the Ash Wednesday Ritual

The start of the Christian Lenten Period begins with Ash Wednesday, a day that Christians usually recognize with fasting, prayer, and a special mass service that involves smearing ashes in the shape of a cross on each person's forehead. For those who practice, the mass itself is a unique ritual that serves as an acknowledgement of human mortality and grief for sinning and straying from God. As the priest applies the ashes, he speaks the phrase "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," reminding the individual of human corporeality and God's power. This year, Ash Wednesday fell on March 2, 2022.

In this research project, I studied the ritual of Ash Wednesday through methods of participation, observation, and interviewing. I accompanied my roommate, an active Catholic, to an evening Ash Wednesday mass at St. Paul's parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I observed the ritual while simultaneously participating and sought to answer questions such as: what is the significance of Ash Wednesday mass? How does this ritual promote a sense of social cohesion and purpose? How do interpretations of Ash Wednesday vary among community members? In answering these questions, I show how the Christian Ash Wednesday mass ritual creates a sense of collective quietude, promotes social cohesion through shared actions, and strengthens Christian identity.

An immediate detail that became apparent during the mass was the mood and atmosphere within the church. All attendees were silent, still, and attentive while the priest spoke from the lectern. The behaviors of all present implied that speaking, fidgeting, and looking around at the

other attendees were not socially acceptable behaviors in this setting, and I felt myself dampening my own behavior in order to match the solemnity and stillness around me.

This observation brought to mind the idea of collective effervescence that Emile Durkheim discusses in Chapter 7: “Origin of the Notion of Totemic Principle, or Mana” from *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. In studying the behavior of individuals who are engaging in collective religious practices, Durkheim noted that the “stimulating and invigorating effect of society is particularly apparent in certain circumstances. In the midst of an assembly that becomes worked up, we become capable of feelings and conduct of which we are incapable when left to our individual resources. When it is dissolved and we are again on our own, we fall back to our ordinary level and can then take the full measure of how far above ourselves we were” (1912: 212). This is the idea of effervescence: a heightened emotional and sensual intensity, and I witnessed and experienced a form of this phenomenon during the mass ritual. However, in contrast to the arousal and excitement that Durkheim references, what I observed was the opposite: a dampened state of being. Rather than collective effervescence, the ritual encouraged collective *quietude*. This state was achieved through various factors: the physical arrangement of the worshippers in the church with each facing forward towards the priest discouraged interpersonal connection, and the format of the mass, during which the priest spoke while all others listened silently, eliminated the ability to speak without disrupting the ritual.

I felt myself swept into this quietude. With the intention of observing and learning, I approached the mass very open-mindedly, curious to see how I would experience the balance between observing and participating. As those around me exhibited behaviors of prayer and mindfulness, I found myself engaging similarly, falling into a meditative and self-reflective

mood which matched that of those around me. I became swept into the collective quietude, connected with those around me through our moment of pause and prayer.

Beyond the heightened self-awareness and reflection, the Ash Wednesday ritual also promoted a sense of social cohesion through the visual identification that the ashes offered. During the mass, the forehead of each attendee was smeared with ashes in the shape of a cross, the most unique practice of this specific ritual that distinguishes it from other weekly mass ceremonies each Sunday. While in the church, surrounded by Christians who had also chosen to attend this mass and be anointed with ashes, I felt like a member of a greater whole. Our shared decision to participate and the collective experience of being anointed solidified our shared bonds. However, as I left the church, my feeling shifted: I suddenly felt singled out and different; the ashen cross on my forehead was a clear signal of my Christian identity among others without such visible markings. Without any additional communication necessary on my behalf, my presence around others was sufficient to convey my religion. As Durkheim aptly stated, I was experiencing how “the best way of testifying to oneself and others that one is part of the same group is to place the same distinctive mark on the body” (1912: 234).

Another important part of my research included interviewing my roommate with whom I attended this Ash Wednesday mass. She grew up in a Catholic family and identifies strongly with that faith. As I talked with her, I learned that she chose to attend an evening ceremony, as opposed to a morning ceremony, specifically because she did not want to go about her full day with ashes on her forehead. She was concerned that the identification that the ashes provided would distinguish her from those she interacted with in a way that might make her feel uncomfortable. Her stance on this further demonstrated the impact that the ashes have on an individual’s sense of identity. During the Ash Wednesday ritual itself, the ashes

promoted social unification and cohesion; however, as soon as the anointed individuals leave the mass, the ashes are a symbol of social distinction, setting those with ashes apart from those without.

While the specific ritual I studied was the Ash Wednesday mass, this ritual is only a brief part of some Christians' acknowledgment of Ash Wednesday in its entirety. According to my roommate some choose to fast throughout the day on Ash Wednesday by consuming only one full meal. She explained that this fast serves as a reminder of human mortality and dependence on God. However, when I asked her about her personal practice, she stated that she did not fast because the disruption to her daily activities was undesirable, and fasting did not significantly improve her sense of spirituality or connectedness to her religion. Thus, there are clearly differing interpretations of this ritual within the Christian community. Some interpret Ash Wednesday as a strict day of fasting in order to have a physical reminder of the temporal nature of human life, while others acknowledge this day only by attending mass, an interpretation which more strongly emphasizes Christian membership and identity rather than physical deprivation.

From this analysis of the Christian Ash Wednesday mass, the means by which this ritual holds significance for participants, promotes social cohesion, and establishes identity are clear. The physical and social structure of the ceremony leads to an environment of collective quietude and self-reflection, and the ashes anointed on the forehead are visual markers of an individual's Christian identity. Many of the concepts presented by Emile Durkheim are exemplified in this ritual. While the exact interpretations and practices surrounding Ash Wednesday differ among Christians, this yearly ritual serves as an agent of mindful unity, belonging, and a reminder of not just Christian identity, but the human condition itself.

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