

# CHRISTMAS, ASHES, CHRISM AND CHOICES

**A**t present, I am defending the contents of the refrigerator from my wife. She has threatened the innocent cheeses, salamis and pâtés in the refrigerator with annihilation, so that there are no temptations in the house.



**BRIAN  
KANE**

As we passed from the celebratory spirit of the holidays into the austerity that often marks the first months of the new year, we negotiated a stay for some, but not all, of the condemned. I reluctantly agreed to the demise of the pâtés, the stray slices of formerly frozen pizza, the pepperoni and the smoked mozzarella, ransoming them for the rest of the cheeses, the prosciutto, some crackers and the cherry preserves.

As we started 2021, my wife was eager to push forward with the disciplines of moderation, fasting and exercise. I'm not quite there yet.

This cycle is not new. In fact, it is ancient. The liturgical year begins with Advent and Christmas. That leads us into Ordinary Time, then Ash Wednesday and Lent, the Chrism Mass, and Easter, with our annual baptismal promises. Then, once again, we return to Ordinary Time, where we have our regular habits until we begin the cycle anew. Christmas, Ashes, Chrism and Choices...

As Catholics, liturgy is the pulse of our spiritual and ethical lives. Liturgy comes from a Greek word that means "public worship." In the Catholic tradition, liturgy refers to shared communal prayer, which is close to the original Greek, but not the same since for us one does not literally have to be in the presence of others to participate in liturgy. There are the many prayerful acts that we, the faithful, follow, as a community. Some are sacramental, like the Mass, but others are not, like the Liturgy of the Hours or the rosary.

Often, Catholic liturgy has a physical presence, which we have been missing this past year. Ordi-

narily, we are anointed with chrism when we are baptized or when we are sick, blessed with ashes at the beginning of Lent, and renew our baptism with water at the Easter liturgy.

In the maelstrom of COVID-19 and all that it has wrought, it is essential to recall these traditions, as we ordinarily practice them, and to understand how they both reflect and support our journey toward holiness. It is easy to forget death and redemption when the bodies of the dead are kept from us and final rites are so abbreviated. Grief, at a distance, will inevitably numb us to love and connection with each other.

Ethical actions are not usually "crisis" decisions, although they may seem to be that for those in the midst of difficult choices. In fact, it is our daily habits, our virtues and vices, that most effectively define our moral lives. In crisis, we usually default to the choices that we make day-to-day.

In my work as a clinical ethicist on critical care floors, my conversation with a family who

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had to make difficult decisions about the care of their loved one inevitably turned toward trying to understand how that person made their own choices. We, the care team, would ask the family about what the person valued and how they lived. These conversations were often more about listening than speaking.<sup>1</sup>

What may have seemed to be extraordinary decisions for the family were often not that at all. Their duty, often, was simply to discern and honor the wishes of the dying. Accompaniment is usual-

ly what is necessary, rather than heroic decisions.

Catholic ethics navigates the difficulties of how to act, but it never changes the primary goal of our lives. So, what is the purpose of the pattern of our liturgical traditions and how do they relate to ethics?

We want to be ethical so that we are holy; to be in relation with God and with each other. In short, our liturgical traditions should lead us to this goal of connectedness. How do they do this? Annually, we recall three fundamental truths.

The first lesson is: we all die. Every one of us — daily, weekly, monthly, annually. We all know the cost of our shattered relationships when death comes. We mourn for the loss of our connection with our families and our friends. In the time of a pandemic, we are even more aware that death accompanies us each day. The ashes of Lent remind us of this. Anointed with ashes, we mourn in the time before Easter.

In physical, emotional and spiritual death, we, the survivors, grieve. Together we shoulder the burden of getting our dead to the end of their journey. Then, we stand at the graveside, look into the abyss, and we weep, and we mourn. We hope that others will mourn for us, when the time comes. We believe that this world is not all.

This tension of grief and duty toward those who have died reminds me of the words of the writer Thomas Lynch when he described his own prospective burial in winter ...

“I want a mess made in the snow so that the earth looks wounded, forced open, an unwilling participant. Forego the tent. Stand openly to the weather ... And you should see it till the very end. Avoid the temptation of tidy leavetaking in a room, a cemetery chapel, at the foot of the altar. None of that. Don’t dodge it because of the weather. We’ve fished and watched football in worse conditions. It won’t take long. Go to the hole in the ground. Stand over it. Look into it. Wonder. And be cold. But stay until it’s over. Until it is done.”<sup>2</sup>

“Until it is done.” The doing of this is significant. It is to make sure that the labor of the grave is completed; to shoulder the grief and the sorrow of departure. And in the midst of this, to still believe that the moment of death has been overcome. We believe that the moment when the casket is lowered into the grave is not the final word.

Stay, until this is done.

The second lesson of our liturgical year is Easter. What if Jesus died? What if Jesus overcame death? What if Jesus was resurrected? Easter is the celebration of the moment when these “what ifs” became the “what is.” So, what is Easter? The Gospel of Luke, in particular, offers us a connection between death and redemption.

St. Luke describes what happened after the death of Jesus (Luke 23:48 – 24:1). He has breathed his last, and those who had gathered for the spectacle, “returned home beating their breasts ... but

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all his acquaintances stood at a distance, including the women who had followed him from Galilee and saw these events.” Joseph of Arimathea requests the body of Jesus from Pilate and places it in a tomb, as the Sabbath is about to begin.

But, what is notable is what follows. St. Luke then says that “The women who had come from Galilee with him followed behind, and when they had seen the tomb and the way in which his body was laid in it, they returned and prepared spices and perfumed oils. Then they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment. But at daybreak on the first day of the week they took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.”

We don’t know from St. Luke what these women thought, but we know what they did. They stayed until it was done. In spite of what would have been a very crushing grief and confusion, they examined the tomb and made sure that all was as it should be. After the Sabbath, they returned to finish the task and found the empty tomb, with the two “men in dazzling garments,” who asked them, “Why do you seek the dead among the living?”

It is worth noting that St. Luke also writes that after the women shared their experience with the community, people doubted them, in particular the apostles, and said that “their story seemed like

nonsense and they did not believe them.”

This witness of the faithful women has always resonated. In spite of the grief, and the uncertainty, and the horror of the crucifixion, they still did what was necessary. In doing this, they were the bearers of our grief and the first recipients of the joy of Easter.

From those events, we, over 2,000 years later, have been given this gift of faith. As Christians, we believe that death has been overcome. We can now perceive a time when our relationships are connected by love, rather than being destroyed by sin.

The third liturgical and ethical lesson is Ordinary Time, which takes up most of the liturgical year. Our awareness of death and redemption should inform the way that we live our lives, day to day.

Ordinary Time is expressed in the constant choices of our lives, our everyday moments, where our beliefs are lived. The hopes of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter become embodied in us when each day we love, we learn and we live our choices.

Ordinary Time, seems ... so ordinary. How do we describe the hugs that we give our children, the gentle touch for our loved ones, the charitable acts of everyday life, the daily tasks of care? Ordinary time is life lived in the hope of perfection.

Death, Easter, and our day-to-day choices define our ethics. Liturgy provides the communal connection. As we reach out to God, in prayer and in solidarity, we connect with each other. We share our common journey and support one another.

Christmas, Ashes, Chrism and Choice recalls our values. Then, our practice of these values

in our day-to-day lives changes the world. The change may be small, a smile won from an individual act of compassion. Or, it may be more systemic, like a national effort to care for people who are poor and vulnerable.

Christmas, Ashes, Chrism and Choices ... In the time between the start of writing this column and now, my wife and I are now in Ordinary Time. Pita chips have been exiled to the basement, to be retrieved only when I can eat them alone. I have agreed to cook and stock vegan options for the freezer. And, we will both be more vigilant about getting exercise. (However, the occasional Five Guys Burger on a grocery run has not been discussed, so please don't share this column with her ...).

Looking forward to the rest of the 2021 liturgical year!

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#### NOTES

1. Given the brief discussion that I have outlined here, some may think that I am endorsing the idea that whatever the patient chooses should always be accepted. I am not. Rather, my point is that most patients try to seek out what is good and right, and to fulfill those goals in their own lives, imperfect as they may be. Families see that goodness, in spite of the many, many ways that we all fail to realize our own perfection. In short, I am guided by natural law thinking.

2. Thomas Lynch, *The Depositions: New and Selected Essays on Being and Ceasing to Be* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020): 75.

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