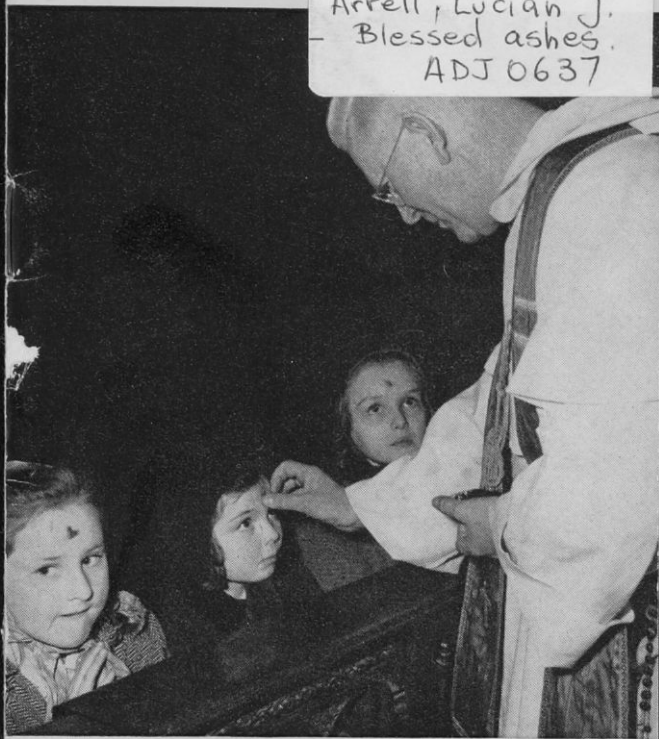
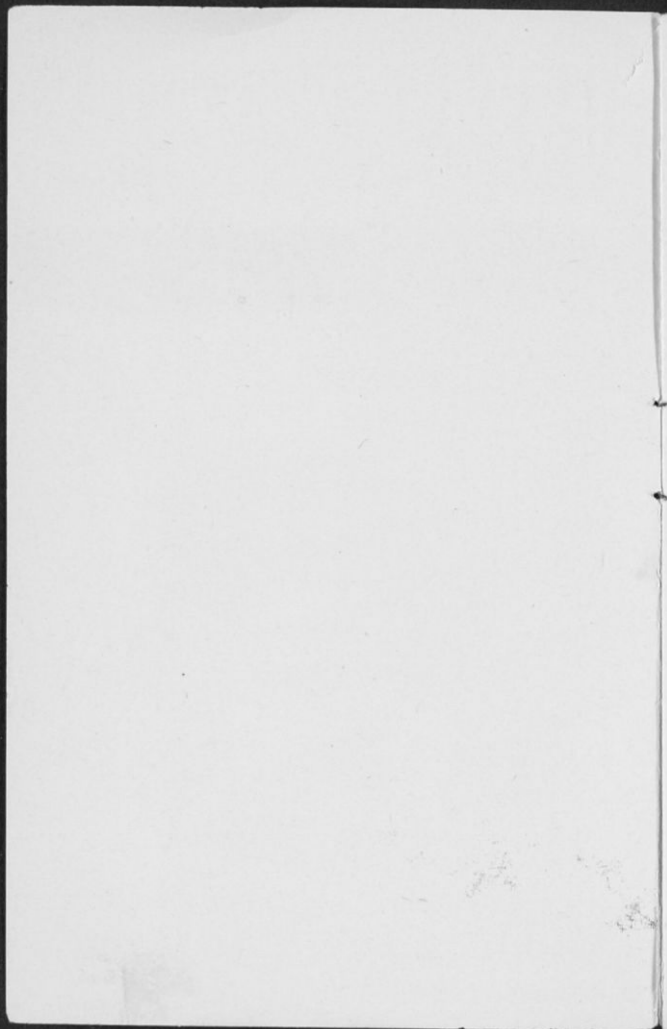


ADJ 0637

BLESSED ASHES

Arrell, Lucian J.
- Blessed ashes.
ADJ 0637





BLESSED ASHES



by

LUCIAN J. ARRELL

BLESSED ASHES

by

LUCIAN J. ARRELL

WE WERE jammed like the proverbial sardines in the Jackson Park "L" as it sped toward the Loop from Chicago's Catholic South Side. It was Ash Wednesday morning, and the majority of the passengers displayed a dark blotch in the middle of their respective foreheads. No one seemed to be conscious of his own, and paid as little attention to the smears on his fellow straphangers' brows until a smallish man, whose forehead was clean but who bore the usual characteristics of an Israelite, demanded to know of the tall brunette and the smaller blonde between whom he stood

tightly sandwiched, what was the meaning of all those dirty faces.

The girls, showing unmistakable Irish tempers, had very effectively told the little Hebrew to keep his wise-cracking to himself, then had given me the sort of side glance that seemed to say: "guess that's squelching him, eh, Father?" But my countenance must have reflected anything but approval, because it mirrored a quick change to uneasy embarrassment in theirs. I felt it now my duty to bring about a more satisfactory solution of the incident. Between jolts and off-balances, as the train suddenly stopped and started and careened madly around sharp "S" curves. I managed to make a beginning of my defense of the "angels with dirty faces." "My good man, that's a very ancient custom. It came to us from your own ancestors."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Father. I was only joking with the girls . . . From my ancestors?"

What do you mean, Father?"

"I mean that little dab of smudge on these peoples' foreheads was made from blessed ashes."

"From blessed ashes?"

"Yes, today is Ash Wednesday. It marks the beginning of Lent, which is a season of penance. This is how we remind ourselves of the need of penance,—that, after all, we are not made for this world, but for the next, that these bodies of ours are not so very important, being only clay. So on the first day of Lent the Church has a beautiful ceremony which consists of imposing ashes on the foreheads of people. As he does this, the priest says: "Remember man that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return."

"Yeh, Father, so the girls put on lip stick and rouge every other day, and on Ash Wednesday ashes."

This remark did nothing to soften the

girls' resentment of the little Hebrew, but it gave me the opportunity to add:

"Of course, there is nothing wrong with using rouge and lip stick in moderation, if the girls think they need it."

There was a flicker of eye-lids at this last conditional clause.

"The Creator certainly wants us to look our best physically, and if the custom of the day is to use these things, there is no harm in them, provided bodily attractiveness is not regarded as more important than spiritual beauty. And that's where Ash Wednesday comes in, and the ashes on the foreheads."

"It's a nice idea, Father, but you say you got it from my ancestors?"

"Yes. As far back as there is any history, ashes have always been considered a symbol of the perishableness of earthly things and a sign of penance. King David, the model of penitents, cried: 'For I did eat ashes like



bread, and mingled my drink with weeping.' And the Ninivites, moved by the preaching of Jonas, 'proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least, and sat in ashes.' So, you see, there is nothing very new in the idea. By the way, don't you have a similar ceremony in your own synagogue?"

"Well, Father, I suppose they do, but — well, you see, I don't attend the synagogue. My parents were Reformed Jews, and, well, I just don't go to church at all."

The girls apparently decided that this admission disqualified our Hebrew friend from further part in the discussion, because the little blonde eagerly took up the matter, protesting:

"But, Father, you said that the Jews, that is, King David ate ashes and that these Nin . . . Nin . . ."

"Ninivites," I prompted.

" . . . Yes, they sat in them."

"Well, we did not take over that part of the ancient ritual, but the Jews also sprinkled ashes on their heads. That custom was followed in the early days of the Church, but at first only in the case of people who had committed grave sins and who were obliged to do public penance. After having gone to confession, these penitents, bare-footed and dressed in mourning, presented themselves at the church door on Ash Wednesday morning and begged the bishop to impose punishment upon them for their sins. The bishop then clothed them in sackcloth and scattered ashes on their heads. Then, as the seven penitential psalms were chanted, the penitents were turned out of the church, not to return until Holy Thursday."

"Does that mean that they couldn't go to Mass all through Lent?" Asked the tall girl.

"That's right. It was a sort of temporary excommunication."

They looked at each other. Then the little one broke in with:

"How bad did people have to be to get that kind of penance?"

"Not any worse than people are now-a-days. It's just that we're bigger sissies today compared to our forefathers in the faith, so the Church has discontinued these more severe forms of penance."

Our little Jew sustained a casual interest in our conversation, and at this point seemed about to say something, when he was anticipated by the tall girl, who was still puzzled about the consequences of missing Mass from Ash Wednesday to Holy Thursday.

"But Father, didn't they commit mortal sin by missing Mass on all those Sundays?"

"No. They were forbidden to go. The Church withheld from them the benefits

of hearing Mass as part of their penance.

Miss Blondy wasn't satisfied.

"Can the Church do that?"

"Of course it can. Doesn't the Church speak with the same authority as Christ Himself? You wouldn't question Our Lord's right to make such a prohibition, would you?"

"Well, no . . ." agreed Blondy.

By this time other spotted foreheads were turned in our direction, and ears strained to catch our words above the screeching of wheels on the ever turning track. We were all of the Household, except our little Hebrew and he had ceased to be an active participant.

"But I didn't finish telling you," I continued. "When these penitents were sent out of the church, the bishop used the same words that God spoke when He drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden, and the same words that the priest uses today when

imposing ashes, 'Remember man that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return.' And with this solemn thought in mind they went off to practice other acts of mortification and to prepare themselves for a worthy return on Holy Thursday."

There was no comment to this, so I went on.

"After a time others, through pious motives, presented themselves to receive the ashes, so in the eleventh century the Church made the practice general for everybody, and in time the ceremony was modified to the one we have today in which the priest simply makes the sign of the cross on each person's forehead with his thumb after having dipped it into the ashes. And, by the way, can either of you tell me where we get the ashes?"

That was easy. Both girls knew that the ashes were of the palms that had been blessed the Palm Sunday of the year before,

and even produced their daily missals to prove to me that they had read that very morning the Antiphon and the four prayers that precede the Mass of Ash Wednesday, and at which time the ashes are blessed.

We were now in the Loop. Our little Jew had wiggled out almost unnoticed some two or three stations ago. Other passengers were leaving the car at every stop. We were no longer crowded.

"The next one's our station, Father," announced the tall girl. "It's all been very interesting."

"I've enjoyed it, Miss."

As they prepared to leave, Blondy spoke close to my ear.

"Would it be wrong for me to rub off the ashes before I get into the office? They're mostly all Protestants."

"Why, of course not. Nothing wrong about it at all, except that . . ."

"Except what, Father?"

"Well, nothing, except that I just thought of what I said about our being bigger sissies today than were our forefathers in the faith."

With a roguish turn of her head and a wave of the hand:

"O.K., Father."

Published By

THE CATHOLIC INFORMATION SOCIETY

214 West 31st St., New York 1, N. Y.

(OPPOSITE PENN TERMINAL)

