

## HOMILY FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

February 21, 2007

**Introduction** Today at noontime a group of Christians gathered for a prayer vigil at the White House. Several people from Our Lady Queen of Peace participated in this public liturgy at the beginning of this Lenten season of repentance. Part of the ceremony included a blessing of ashes and placing them in the form of crosses on the sidewalk and the street in front of that seat of power, signaling the need for our country to repent.

**I** That action reminds us that the season of Lent is not only a private matter. Of course we take on Lenten disciplines personally so as to “get into shape” as athletes do in preparation for competitive events. We try to live more intentionally and reflectively, paring down our intake of food, our TV watching and other amusements, so as to have more quiet in our lives, more serious reading and above all a deeper prayer life and relation with God.

In addition Lent asks us to reflect and act more conscientiously with our fellow human beings. It urges us to see all with whom we come into contact as sisters and brothers, true daughters and sons of our loving God, just as much as each of us is.

**II** And there is quite a public dimension to Lent here in the heart of the empire and for us as members of the Catholic Church. This may be a new dimension for us, but it bears consideration. Doing the kinds of penitential actions just mentioned – paring down our lives in several areas and seeing others as equally daughters and sons of God – are much needed signs in our society which is never satisfied, which always wants more: more security, more power, more things, even more health.

Equally, our acts of penance in this season beg for God’s mercy in a Church that remains silent in the face of an unjust war, torture and our American excesses.

**III** I must say a word as a priest about the clergy scandal in our Church. Once again we must ask forgiveness of you and so many others for the actions of our brothers and the coverup of our bishops. This is part of our Lenten task and I ask that you pray for us in this regard.

**Conclusion** In 1965, during the Vietnam war a Jewish Rabbi who had left Nazi Germany and found refuge in this “land of freedom”, spoke out about the quagmire into which our country was becoming entrapped. His words serve as a fitting conclusion to this Ash Wednesday reflection:

“Vietnam [Iraq] is a personal problem. To speak about God and remain silent on Vietnam [Iraq] is blasphemous... In the sight of so many thousands of civilians and soldiers slain, injured, crippled, of bodies emaciated, or forests destroyed by fire, God confronts us with this question: Where are you?.” (Rabbi Abraham Josua Heschel)