Columns
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Ahna Ziegler)



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Since the Lenten season includes a chance to confess one's sinfulness, perhaps I should start by admitting that on occasion I have been vain about my crosses.

In elementary school, when ashes were distributed, some of my classmates and I vied to get in line for the priest who was known for giving the best ash cross. Ideally, it would be a defined cross, nice and dark so it would last all day. (Though later, in our teenage years this could be seen as a disadvantage, and some would help it disappear with a furtive swipe of a hand.) But if the ash trail led straight down the bridge of your nose, all the way to the tip, it was not considered vanity to wipe that off.

It was rumored that the popular priest cheated by wetting his fingers with water or olive oil, which is why his crosses were so dark.

The other priest did not give good crosses. You either got a straight line across the brow, or when he was in a real hurry, the best you could hope for was an amorphous smudge that bore no resemblance to a cross. Our friends from the public school delighted in telling us that our faces were dirty, and we would delight in giving them a catechism lesson.

Fast-forwarding a few years, I enjoyed being one of the Catholic crowd on the streets of midtown Manhattan, where it seemed *everyone* sported their ashes proudly. Cab drivers, United Nations representatives, food cart owners — everyone seemed to have ashes whether they were Catholic or not. In fact, one did not even have to go to church.  The priests and ministers would line up on the sidewalk outside St. Agnes Church by Grand Central Station, and everyone could file by for ashes, no questions asked.

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Was my warm glow at wearing my ashes due to piety or pride? Or was it just satisfaction at being part of the "in-crowd" or riding the wave of a cultural phenomenon? I had to examine my motives every year I lived in New York City!

When our Ursuline religious community was begun in 1535, our founder St. Angela Merici, gave us a piece of advice still treasured by her daughters and sons: "Take refuge at the feet of Jesus Christ" (Angela Merici, *Seventh Counsel*). I always pictured

her pointing to the foot of the cross.

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, in my younger years I was never one to seek out crosses. Perhaps I feared that — like the dog who finally actually caught the car — I would not know what to do with it. It was more characteristic of my weak nature and personal piety to pray with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Let this cup pass away from me!"



(Pixabay/Pexels)

But luckily, early in my religious life I learned a valuable lesson about crosses.

As part of a retreat, I participated in a penance service in which we were invited to make a cross out of bits of wood and pieces of twine. I chose a pretty piece of cedar wood, with a nice color and an artistic rim of bark accenting one side, and bound two pieces together artfully with twine. Satisfied with my artistic triumph, I put my cross back into the basket.

At the end of the retreat, we were invited to select one of the crosses from that basket to take home with us. I was looking forward to getting reacquainted with my pretty cross. But by the time I reached the basket, the only one left was — you guessed it — not my cross, but a rough, gray, scruffy, crooked thing.

That night I sat looking at my ugly cross. But the more I looked at it, I realized that this was the cross *given* to me, the one which must have been chosen with me in mind, and it must have a lesson for me. After all, how many people get to choose their own cross?  I still meditate on why the crosses chosen for us are more valuable than any we would choose. What does the scruffy, crooked, gray cross have to say to me? One could really spend a lifetime figuring that out.

But whatever the cross — with it we will have Jesus. And where Jesus is — we will find refuge.

This story appears in the **Lent** feature series. View the full series.