

**Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron**  
**Ash Wednesday**  
**St. Aloysius Church, Detroit**  
**February 17, 2010**

As I prepared myself last evening to come here today to offer the Holy Eucharist, to preach, it occurred to me that I should simplify. Isn't that the point these days? We're all told to simplify, to clean out our closets, have less clutter. So, I hope that I can resist any temptation to complexify and retain my two simple goals, which are to help us appreciate this gesture of receiving ashes, and then to enter it, to be part of the gesture with our whole heart. The gesture: receiving ashes.

There are many ways in which the sacred liturgy, for centuries, even unto today, looks upon this rite of receiving ashes as we might think of enrollment but really better use the word enlistment. We are enlisted in a great struggle by receiving these ashes. The struggle against evil; the struggle against sin, which is a struggle that entangles itself in our own hearts, in our person. And so, the Gospel today about almsgiving and, by extension, other works of charity, the corporal and spiritual works of love. Almsgiving, acts of self-denial, penance fasting, and increased prayer, these are our weapons. This is our strategy to combat the evil of sin in the kingdom of Satan. And St. Paul speaks with a certain urgency that it is my duty to echo and underscore today. I am, too, an ambassador for Christ and I say that this is an acceptable time. Today is the day of salvation. Now is the time to enlist.

So, point two: What are we about, this enlisting? What is it we enroll in? What does it mean? Well, first of all, it must be very attractive; otherwise you wouldn't all be here today. There are a lot of people who grow up with our religious customs and have abandoned them, but you haven't. And that means

something. It's not just about living up to childhood practices. People want to come to church on Good Friday because they want to enlist. They know its right. And they know really what it's about, though we can't all put it into words. It's about our hearts.

We may not have all of the elegant expression to speak of it but we all know that we have not loved as well, and as worthily, as we ought or as we aspire to. We do not love God above all things. We've settled; we all have. Sometimes we settle by lying; sometimes we settle for something less than God by indulging a passion. Sometimes we settle by hardening our heart to the one near us who needs our service. Sometimes we settle by amusing ourselves when we should be praying. That's what Lent is for. That's the struggle. That's what we are enlisted in – the battle for my heart, for your heart – and it's worth fighting. God invites us to enter into this struggle because he wants our hearts. He wants to satisfy our hearts. He wants to give us himself because he knows that's how we are made, or as we say today using our technology metaphors, that's how we're hard-wired.

God wants us to love him and the only way that can happen is if we freely do it. That's the struggle. To look into ourselves and say: How have I settled? How have I been so foolish to exchange God for this or that? What are the things in my life, the dynamics, the habits, the attitudes that lead me to settle for less than God, less than holiness? Less than his love. And so, before I bless the ashes, I'm going to make a long pause and I invite you to do two things. First of all, to continue what I'm sure you have already begun – examine your lives. What is it that entangles you, me, and keeps us from giving ourselves to God? And to think about that, not just that there is such a thing, but what is it? And then, resolve that when you come forward to receive the ashes, you will do it with a great spirit of honesty. Yes, Lord, with your help, I will enter the fray. I will struggle. And Lord, I believe that with your help, what seems invincible will be conquered. And

then, at the end of the liturgy, let everybody come forward for the ration; when army travels on its stomach. We are God's army and God is our food.