Father Larry Richards
Moderator, Bread of Life Community

February 13, 2002
Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-18
Psalms 51:3-6, 12-14, 17
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

You can tell I’m losing my voice! Oh!! Three days of talking…I got done with the parish mission with four days of talking…a fine time. First I wanna~~~look at the crucifix! Isn’t it nice? What Steve did back there? Good job, Steve! Great. We’ve only had it a year. (laughs). What a great time to start, and to~~ to bring into our midst.

Tonight, as we come and we begin lent, we need to go to the first reading. And if you go with me….. you know I was just looking at some of these bibles. What do you people do to these bibles? Are you eating them? What is it, my glory be?! The first one is from Joel. If you go to Joel, Chapter 2. This, in your pew bibles, page 948. Joel, Chapter 2 verse 12. Joel, Chapter 2 verse 12. Page 948. Now listen to this. This is what is the first words out of the Church’s mouth or out of God’s mouth to us as we begin lent. “Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, with weeping, with mourning. Render your hearts, and not your garments and return to the Lord your God.” Let’s look at that for a bit, huh? Here is the God of the universe, and He wants to say something to His people as He calls us together this lent. And what He wants to call us to, is to change our hearts.

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You know, today we had morning mass at 7:00 at uh, you know, down at St. Luke’s of course and then I had mass at the cathedral for our students (well Fr. J did, but I was there of course.) And it’s funny how many people, and then I was just taking communion to somebody who needed communion tonight and I stopped at St. Luke’s again. And there’s always these people waiting. And I go and they come and say, “Father?” “Yes?” “Could I get ashes?” I said, “Well sure, but you can do it yourself you know! It’s no big deal. It’s just ashes.” You know? “Well, Father?” I said, “Go out to the dirt. You know, find some and put in on yourself. That’ll make you feel good.” “Well, Father?” I said, “Did you receive communion?” “Well, no!” “Well then ashes don’t matter!!” I mean, again, like this morning I was very bad. You know that I can be that way. (laughs) You know, and uh, so for the 7:00 mass I says, “Now if I see anybody that sits there and leaves right after that, right after you get ashes today and don’t stay for communion, I hope as you walk out the door, you break your leg!” And then I say, and I’m not kidding… “And I mean it! Yes, I mean it!” People haven’t a clue!! “Put me some black stuff on my face, Father, so I can look holy! But, don’t give me communion!” I mean, tonight again.
Same thing. A woman came up to me after I was running to get that Host, and she says, “Could I have some ashes?” “Sure, if you want ashes lady” is exactly what I said. I said, “But don’t you want Jesus?? Isn’t that what you want?” But see, no! We Catholics go through the motions. 98% of the people in the pews haven’t a clue! “Give me some ashes, Father. Gimme, gimme, gimme!” You know, we’re crowded on Ash Wednesday, we’re crowded on Palm Sunday, we’re crowded on time when we “gimme, gimme, gimme, gimme!” That’s the way we come before God. Gimme, gimme, gimme, gimme! Will I get something so that everybody can know that I am holy? Can I have some ashes? But, God looks at us and says, “Listen! Your garments and your external appearance isn’t what I’m interested in!” The gospel today, what did he say, “When you’re fasting,” (I always think it’s weird that we do this) “When you’re fasting, do what?” Wash your faces. And what do we do? Hey, we’re fasting. Big stuff on our faces and we go, “I got my ashes!” But see, that’s ok! But my thing is, is God looks at us tonight and says, “Listen! I- want –your- heart! I want your heart to be converted this lent. I want inside of you, not external.” Is your heart converted? What are you doing for lent this year? Huh? Is it something that’s going to affect your heart? Is it something that’s going to make you more holy? Is it something that’s going to really bring you to a deeper conversion? “Yes, Father! I gave up pepsi!” “Whoo. Good. That’s an important thing!” But what is it Jesus is calling you to do inside of your heart? Is this going to be just another lent where, “I gotta get through lent…….” You know, I wish I would’ve brought my breviary. But, in the opening line of the office of readings, which is…you know…the prayers and that the priests say. For this it says, “Lord, help us to enter into repentance, so we can feel your refreshment.” Isn’t that weird? The very first thing that the church is saying to the priest is, “Lord, let us enter into repentance, so that we can feel your refreshment.” See, what happens, what’s supposed to happen for lent is I enter in and I give God permission to do a number on my heart and take everything away that it needs to be purified with, so that I can be refreshed. So I can be rid of these burdens—these things that I cling to on earth. So I can finally let those things go and say, “What’s important is that I spend eternity with Almighty God in heaven!” And so anything that keeps me clinging to this world, I’ve got to slowly start putting it away. And say, you know, “this isn’t important to me. I don’t live for the television. I can put it aside.” (gasp) “I don’t live for food. I can put that aside.” (gasp) You see what God is calling us to? What God calls you and me to do, is see what is it in your heart that you cling to more than you cling to me? Rend that. Let me have it. You know, again, I think I’ve told you this saying before. “Sometimes I think I’ve fully surrendered, and then He asks me for something that I don’t want to give up.” Sometimes I think I’ve fully surrendered, and then He asks me for something that I don’t want to give up. What is it that you wouldn’t want to give up? You know, a kid yesterday, came in and I said, “What are you gonna give up son?” “I’m gonna give up pepsi.” I says, “Why don’t you give up beer?” “Are you out of your mind, Father?” This is a college kid. “I don’t have to give up beer!” I said, “But, you like it a lot, don’t you.” He said, “I do. It’s real relaxing.” “Give it up!!” Ooooooohhhhh. “Father, is why I don’t come see you.” You see?? (laughter) Because, again there’s a little bit of a challenge there. “Father, just give me a nice homily, give me some ashes, and let me go home!” No. Not with this priest. What is it that God is putting on your heart tonight? That he wants you to rend, so that you can feel refreshed. What is it that sometimes gets in the place of God in your life? And the best way to think is your daily life. What gets most of your time? What’s more important in your time than God—and start putting that aside. And if you start doing that this lent, then the Lord is going to give you a refreshing Easter. And a refreshing life.
You got it? You get it? Good! May each of you know His love today and forever. Amen!