

The Sacred Sign of Ashes from a Book by Romano Guardini¹

On the edge of the woods grows a larkspur. Its glorious blue blossom rising on its bending stalk from among the dark green curiously-shaped leaves fills the air with color. A passerby picks the flower, loses interest in it and throws it into the fire, and in a short moment all that is left of that splendid show is a thin streak of grey ash.

What fire does in an instant, time is always doing to everything that lives. The delicate fern, the stout mullein, the rooted oak, butterflies, darting swallows, nimble squirrels, heavy oxen, all of them, equally, sooner or later, by accident, disease, hunger, cold,--all these clear-cut forms, all this flourishing life, turns to a little ash, a handful of dry dust, which every breeze scatters this way and that. All this brilliant color, all this sensitive, breathing life, falls into pale, feeble, dead earth, and less than earth, into ashes. It is the same with ourselves. We look into an opened grave and shiver: a few bones, a handful of ash-grey dust.

Remember man
that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.

Ashes signify man's overthrow by time. Our own swift passage, our and not someone else's, ours, mine. When at the beginning of Lent the priest takes the burnt residue of the green branches of the last Palm Sunday and inscribes with it on my forehead the sign of the cross, it is to remind me of my dearth...

Everything turns to ashes, everything whatever. This house I live in, these clothes I am wearing, my household stuff, my money, my fields, meadows, woods, the dog that follows me, my horse in his stall, this hand I am writing with, these eyes that read what I write, all the rest of my body, people I have loved, people I have hated, or been afraid of, whatever was great in my eyes upon earth, whatever small and contemptible, all without exception will fall back into dust.

¹**Sacred Signs** by Romano Guardini, trans. by Grace Branham, Pio Decimo Press, St Louis MO, 1956. Pp.53-55.