



Wear your ashes proudly, and encourage generosity

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As a Catholic communicator in faith and profession, I've been asked a lot these past few weeks about a certain atheist transit ad campaign that's starting in Toronto this week. How will the Catholics respond?

Should we be going to ad agencies or marketers to craft an effective response? Or developing a hot new branding strategy? I think the solution rests right in front of, or more correctly, over our eyes ... ashes.

Tomorrow marks the first day of Lent. Ash Wednesday, the day when we are marked with ashes (burned from last year's Palm Sunday palms), reminds us of our frailty and sinfulness as we enter the most holy season of the Catholic faith calendar.

During the next 40 days we abstain (remember giving something up for Lent?), perform acts of charity (giving of our time, talent and treasure) and focus on prayer to recall the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Who needs to buy transit ads when you have a marketing team of hundreds of thousands? Ash Wednesday is one of the rare times you'll see us "marked" with the sign of our faith, wearing our colours as obviously and proudly as any World Cup-crazed soccer fan -- well, without the whooping, honking and flag waving.

So, tomorrow here's an invitation to all Catholics in the city to receive that simple ashen cross on their foreheads and wear it proudly all day. No blocking it with a fancy hairdo, headband or casually brushing them away. Keep the ashes there from morning to night and see how the city responds.

Or if you'd rather concentrate on charity, hand a stranger \$10 and ask them to give it to someone they think will need a helping hand. "Pay it forward." When they realize this is not part of any sort of pyramid scheme, it may get them thinking. You can be sure this will make for some lively water cooler conversation the next day.

And for non-Catholics, those of another faith or no faith at all, I invite you to ask questions and engage others in a respectful discussion about faith.

While this marketing team of one is offering just a few tangible ideas for tomorrow, there are certainly dozens more. No doubt someone will start a "Wearing My Ashes Proudly" group on Facebook. On YouTube, someone else will deliver a stirring reflection on Lent with ashes proudly displayed. The possibilities are endless.

Let's not forget the tremendous contributions people of all faiths make to the GTA. Our places of worship, social service agencies, schools, outreach ministries -- you'll find them everywhere in our community. Most days this work is done quietly and without any fanfare. I can't imagine our city without them.

Note to our faith ambassadors on the street: Do this all humbly, with kindness and with a smile on your face. In the words of St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times, when necessary use words."

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