

Ashes at the train station

by [Gawain de Leeuw](#)

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Yesterday I offered “ashes to go” at the White Plains train station. It’s [apparently controversial](#), but I’m letting others do the heavy theological lifting. I wanted to experience it before I reflected.

It was cold. Below freezing. We still haven’t gotten out of the polar vortex, which I think has decided that it’s very comfortable in its new digs and it will never leave. Besides, spring has gone fishing. Ice fishing.

At first, I stood outside the train station in my cassock and surplice for a bit, but once I found myself unable to move my hands, I entered the lobby across from the newspaper kiosk. It was also cold. The doors kept opening as commuters rushed in. To keep my hands warm, I’d rub them against each other as I held my little glass bowl full of burned palms. I would have rubbed them between my surplice and cassock, but I worried it would look vaguely illegal. So I kept my hands visible.

I stood still, as I didn’t want to be pushy, merely present. Available to the seeker, but conveniently ignored by the apathetic, distracted, and irreligious. I didn’t want to raise anyone’s anxieties or hurt anyone’s feelings by being so enthusiastically a priest.

People said, “I heard about this.” Apparently the radio and papers found this fascinating. Press might be good. *Look at those quirky Episcopalians, standing in the cold, offering dirt and telling people they’re all going to die.*

“I didn’t know this was happening,” said another. *This?*

“Can you do this?” Am I allowed? Well, *I won’t tell anyone if you won’t*, I didn’t say. *I have a license.*

A German woman in a Land’s End Coat passed me, paused, turned back, paused, began to approach, paused, and then came up to me and asked, “Do I need to do

anything for this?" I'm guessing it seemed like a weird American peculiarity to offer "ashes on the go." *Everything's on the go in America.* Yes, I could tell she was from Germany. Bavaria, probably the upper Palatinate.

I said, "No." Absolution can happen another time. Like last night, after I used a blowtorch to burn the ashes. And a fire extinguisher for the unexpected part that followed. It felt like baptism by fire. Pretty close, I'd say. We avoided needing to call the fire department. *Note to self, don't borrow a 20-year-old blow torch.*

A young professional woman in a camel-colored overcoat, plaid skirt, and black stockings said, "Now do I need to confess my sins first, or later?" I was curious about her sins, but didn't ask in case I began to think of sins myself.

"Later," I said. *I'm just offering ashes.* I left my oil of reconciliation in the sacristy. I didn't give her my number.

An unshaven guy in a NY giants hoodie and jeans that hadn't been washed for about a year said, "Fadduh. You Catlik?"

I sometimes want to say "yes" when people ask me, but that would have not answered his specific question. "Episcopalian," I said.

"Oh. Well, it's nice to meet you." He didn't approach. He turned around and lit a cigarette.

A hefty guy in a T-shirt, suspenders, and a canvas-looking overcoat, waddled over to me and said, "Fathuh, I'm so glad you're doing this," and he became very reverent. I administered. The unshaven guy asked him how he was doing. They engaged in the conversations that people have when they recognize each other, the order of the familiar.

Several said, "I just wasn't going to get to church today. Thanks." Glad they think I can offer that relief, but that was not my intention.

One sighed, "Ah, now I'm relieved. I don't have to go." Jesus mocks me.

I was asked where I was from. One said, "St. Barts? Never heard of it. In White Plains? I thought it was in Yonkers." I don't take this personally. He was Catholic, so the church wouldn't be on his radar. There is a St. Barts in Yonkers. He left confused, perhaps thinking he might have gotten inauthentic ashes.

A former member of my youth group saw me; we hugged. She's now a corporate lawyer. "Not exactly God's work," she said. I said she could pay someone else to do that now. "First, I pay off the loans." We laughed. Sallie Mae first, then Jesus. She likes the people in her job: they're bright and sharp, she tells me. I'm glad to have seen her. When someone apologizes for her work, I feel like I should offer some absolution. But I forgot the holy water, and she had to go. "Good to see you," we each said.

Another guy asked, "Do you take donations?" I wasn't ready for donations. Getting paid for dust, however, could be a very profitable business venture. It may be unethical, but Goldman Sachs was doing when it sold Mortgage Backed Securities, and nobody's incriminated them. At least buyers would know it's dust in my case. And I'd charge way less. Actually the entire endowment of my church at its peak would have been a billionth of the capital that the great banks crushed into nothingness.

That should be funny, but that happens to be what they actually did to our endowment.

Next year I'll take donations. I'll have a little sign saying, *I'm Episcopalian. I gladly welcome Benjamins.*

A Franciscan Catholic Priest once told me about a Catholic bishop who'd go to Wall Street and distribute the ashes. "He'd *clean up!*" he said. "Hundred dollar bills. Then they told him to stop. So then the Wall Street guys just went to Trinity across the street." I'm not sure if I should be proud of that. I love Trinity, but I'm not sure if they need the cash. They have more money than God. God asks Trinity for loans.

A woman I recognize greets me. "Hey—you weren't in class last night. You missed a really good one." I'm studying to be certified by the French Wine Institute. I missed drinking Pinot Noirs from the Côte-d'Or to eat pancakes and bacon. At least we used real maple syrup.

"I was working my day job," I explained. "Mardi Gras is important in the church." I wasn't sure if that was a suitable explanation, given that the class is really important to her. And to me, but priorities.

She furrowed her eyebrow, in with the confused look of the unchurched. "Well, it was a really good time. We had a great guest speaker, a master sommelier."

“I’ll make up for it later.” Actually, I had opened up a bottle of burgundy the previous evening. “I’ll see you in a couple weeks!” Although wine is a vocation as well, I’m not compensated for it, and God remains prior to the vine, although certainly that’s one place I experience his grace.

A new parishioner saw me: “Hey Gawain,” he said. “Funny seeing you here. Giving out ashes, eh?” He smiled widely, with the grin made when clashing worlds is a pleasant, rather than an inconvenient, surprise.

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“Well, I’ve never received ashes, and I don’t think I’ll start now, but it was good to see you.” He grew up low-church. My own church was once low-church at one time, but now we’re even now singing Allegri on Good Friday and the Missa De Angelis’ version of the kyrie.

I’ve been around the neighborhood for a long time, so a couple of acquaintances stopped by when they saw me. “Oh my,” said one. “I can’t go to mass, so its great to see you.” She’d partied with my congregation a few times, being good friends with a couple of my parishioners. Another: “Hi Father, I’m from St. Andrew’s.” Just in case I didn’t recognize her, her tone indicated I should have.

I’ve been in this city for 15 years.

I’ve been commuting from this train station for 15 years.

Some were rushing past me before stopping, so I rushed to administer. “r’mber dust, dust y’ll r’turn.” Others I guessed spoke in mispronounced Spanish. “Tu ers polvo, polvo volvras.”

There were a few, “Man, it’s Ash Wednesday? Already? Wow!” These are people who don’t follow the liturgical year. For them, Easter is always a surprise. They might have given something up for Lent if they had remembered when it began. The set of sincere, undisciplined, Catholics.

I distributed ashes to cops, sanitation workers, financial managers, administrators, and students. I’m not sure if I promoted piety, reflection, or transformation. I doubt that this was effective “evangelism”—but it was pleasant to recognize piety where it is. I’m sure I annoyed a few who hate seeing priests out and about, who would prefer that we stay in churches, who looked at me, turned their heads, and ran.

I did learn more about a particular place. I rarely experience a station except as a commuter. Yet I observed the system, the relationships, between the workers who are cleaning, the guy at the newsstand; the travelers with suitcases; those waiting for people to take the train with them; others seeing familiar faces; the ones who rush; the ones who don't; the fashionable and the utilitarian. The station is a hub from which humanity circulates.

I'm not sure if I will do it again, but I did learn one useful practice for all ministers and theologians: remember the hand warmer.

*Originally posted at [The Divine Latitude](#)*