

From the Liturgy Office...

Customs and Traditions of Ash Wednesday and the Imposition of Ashes in Time of Pandemic

As Ash Wednesday fast approaches we, as Catholics, prepare to enter into the penitent season of Lent. On this day all the faithful, according to ancient custom, are encouraged to approach the altar to be marked on the forehead with a sign of the cross made of blessed ashes.



The origins of this ancient practice developed from the Lenten customs that existed during the late 5th Century. Penitence and fasting are two of the key elements of lent and thus also of Ash Wednesday. Hence, at that time, it was customary for those who had repented of their sins cover themselves with ashes and clothed their bodies with sackcloth. Subsequently, wearing sack cloth and sprinkling the head with ashes became an ancient sign of repentance. Similarly, the Biblical custom for repentance was to fast, wear sackcloth, sit in dust and ashes, and put dust and ashes on one's head.

Although we no longer normally wear sackcloth or sit in dust and ashes, the ancient customs of fasting and putting ashes on one's forehead as a sign of mourning and penance have survived to this day.

This year, due to the global pandemic, the practice of how the faithful will receive ashes will be modified by the diocese to ensure the safety and well-being of everyone.

During the time of distribution of the blessed ashes, the priest says only once, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" or "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel". He then will return to the ancient custom of sprinkling ashes on the heads of those who come forward.

It is important to remember that it does not matter that ashes are not readily visible to others. The ashes we receive are intended as a sign for the person receiving them. It symbolises our fragility and mortality and our need to be redeemed by the mercy of God. Most importantly, it symbolises an attitude of internal penance to which all the baptised are called during Lent.

God bless,
Rita Cordina
Liturgy Coordinator