



Committee on Divine Worship

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MEMORANDUM

To: All Bishops
From: Most Rev. Leonard P. Blair, Archbishop of Hartford
Chairman, USCCB Committee on Divine Worship
Date: January 12, 2021
Re: Ash Wednesday and the memorial of St. Blaise in 2021

You will recall that the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued two decrees last year (dated March 19 and March 25) that provided special guidance for the celebration of Holy Week during the pandemic. The instructions that were given were intended mostly to assist priests in circumstances in which the presence of a congregation would be impossible. Those provisions, however, were explicitly granted only for the year 2020. As Lent approaches, we will have to wait to see whether the Holy See will issue similar guidance this year, should the situation continue to warrant it.

In the meantime, the Congregation has issued a “Note on Ash Wednesday,” and the Committee on Divine Worship wishes to offer some brief observations on it and on the celebration of the memorial of St. Blaise.

Blessing of Throats on the memorial of St. Blaise (February 3)

Note that the *Book of Blessings* contains the following provision for this rite:

1628. If, for pastoral reasons, each individual cannot be blessed in the manner described in no. 1627, for example when great numbers are gathered for the blessing or when the memorial of Saint Blaise occurs on a Sunday, a priest or deacon may give the blessing to all assembled by extending hands, without the crossed candles, over the people while saying the prayer of blessing. A lay minister says the prayer proper to lay ministers without making the sign of the cross.

The current circumstances would certainly be considered a sufficient pastoral reason to avoid administration of the blessing to individuals in the usual manner, should there be any concern of danger due to the ongoing pandemic.

Distribution of Ashes on Ash Wednesday (February 17)

While Ash Wednesday is not a holyday of obligation and while there is no requirement for the clergy and faithful to receive the imposition of ashes, it is rightly observed as a celebration of high importance, and many will surely wish to participate even amid the current difficulties.

During this time of pandemic, the Holy See has modified the method of distributing the ashes, as outlined in the following “Note”:

Prot. N. 17/21

NOTE ON ASH WEDNESDAY
Distribution of Ashes in Time of Pandemic

The Priest says the prayer for blessing the ashes. He sprinkles the ashes with holy water, without saying anything. Then he addresses all those present and only once says the formula as it appears in the Roman Missal, applying it to all in general: “Repent, and believe in the Gospel”, or “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”.

The Priest then cleanses his hands, puts on a face mask and distributes the ashes to those who come to him or, if appropriate, he goes to those who are standing in their places. The Priest takes the ashes and sprinkles them on the head of each one without saying anything.

From the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 12 January 2021.

Robert Card. Sarah
Prefect

+Arthur Roche
Archbishop Secretary

These changes minimize the necessity of physical contact between minister and recipient and remove the need for the minister to speak while in close proximity to the recipient.

The distribution of ashes via sprinkling is a common practice in some countries but is not well known here. Therefore, the Committee encourages ministers to provide some explanation to the faithful, to avoid unnecessary confusion.

Note also that the *Book of Blessings* provides instructions for the distribution of ashes outside of Mass (nos. 1656-1678).

As we move closer to Holy Week, the Committee on Divine Worship will continue to monitor developments and offer further observations for your consideration.