



Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama

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Very Reverend Justin L. Ward, S.T.L.
Vicar for Sacred Liturgy

MEMORANDUM

To: Priests of the Diocese of Birmingham
From: Fr. Justin Ward, Vicar for Sacred Liturgy
Date: January 13, 2021
RE: Blessing of Throats and Ash Wednesday Protocols

Based on recommendations from The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments and the USCCB Committee on Divine Worship the following observations and protocols are offered for the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama.

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. Discretion is left to pastors according to the protocols in their parishes.

Distribution of Ashes on Ash Wednesday (February 17)

During this time of pandemic, the Holy See has modified the method of distributing the ashes. 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, ministers are encouraged to provide some explanation to the faithful, to avoid unnecessary confusion.

We recall that the sprinkling ashes on the crown of the head recalls the biblical method of putting on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of penance: “Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth upon their heads” (Neh 9:1).

While the American method of putting ashes on the forehead, usually in the sign of the cross, allows the ashes to be visible to others so that the communal, penitential nature of the day might be more readily visible, the modified method of distribution during a time of pandemic certainly hearkens back to the more traditional manner.

Liturgical Protocol in the Diocese of Birmingham

“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.”¹

The most notable difference is that priests are to say the formula only once to everyone present, rather than to each person as they approach.

Bishop Raica has clarified that in the Diocese of Birmingham our practice will be to sprinkle dry ashes on the crown of the head, rather than the forehead. Persons should make a slight bow as they approach the minister to make the crown of their head more easily accessible.

¹ CDWDS Note, January 12, 2021.