

# Ash Wednesday 2021

Very Rev. Anthony Bawyn

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic a year ago, not only have all of us as citizens of the world drastically altered our lifestyles to keep ourselves and others safe, but also the Catholic Church has made several changes to the way the liturgy and other rites are celebrated. We can all remember Masses being celebrated with only a few essential ministers allowed in the church, and, once we were able to celebrate publicly, we received Holy Communion as we were going out the door. These accommodations were made for safety, knowing what we did at the time and, gradually, we have readjusted.

The Church is still readjusting to protect everyone, and one change that will affect many of us shortly is the distribution of ashes on Ash Wednesday. This is customarily a day when large numbers gather to observe the day and receive ashes. The Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments has determined that this year the distribution of ashes will take place throughout the whole Church by means of sprinkling. The priest will bless the ashes and then speak the customary formula once over all the people. Then, wearing a mask, the priest, deacon or minister will take the ashes and sprinkle them on the top of the head of each person in silence. Praying the formula only once over all the people who are gathered eliminates the transmission of aerosols and sprinkling the ashes on the head eliminates physical contact.

Because this change may surprise us, I take this opportunity to share with you about 1) the custom of distributing ashes, 2) the use of ashes in the Scriptures, and 3) how this change can help us think more consciously about a practice we know so well.

First, because many are interested in the legitimacy of the change, let me point out what the ritual books say. The Roman Missal states, "Then the Priest places ashes on the head of all those present who come to him." The Book of Blessings says, "The minister then places the ashes on those who come forward." Neither rite is more specific than this, so local custom prevails. For example, in many English-speaking countries the minister traces a cross of dampened ashes on the forehead of the person participating in the ritual. In Italy, Spain and parts of Latin America the practice is to sprinkle dry ashes on the top of the head. The directive for this year may be unusual for us, but it is already the practice in a large part of the Catholic world.

Second, the Old Testament gives several examples of the use of ashes. In most cases the use of ashes is penitential, and sometimes ashes are a punishment. In Exodus, God instructs Moses to throw ashes into the air in front of Pharaoh so that as the dust settles the people will be covered with. Later in the same book, Moses melts the golden calf in the fire, and, in anger, he throws the powder that remains into the drinking water and forces the people to drink. In the book of Jonah the king of Nineveh instructs everyone to wear sackcloth and sit in ashes as a sign of penance. When Job is afflicted with sores, he sits in the ashes as a sign of lamentation. At the end of the book, Job speaks humbly to God and repents "in dust and ashes." The New Testament Letter to the Hebrews recalls the Old Testament practice of sprinkling a heifer's ashes as a sign of atonement. From these examples we can see the ancient roots of the different ways of using ashes in a ritual way.

Finally, we might consider the practice of sprinkling ashes in the context of the gospel reading on Ash Wednesday in which Jesus instructs his hearers to keep their works of prayer, fasting and almsgiving hidden. Sometimes it is a sign of Catholic pride that we wear our ashes in public on Ash Wednesday hoping that others will notice. Of course, we can have a higher motive and use it as a chance to share our Christian faith—Catholics are not the only Christians who celebrate Ash Wednesday—with those who may ask about the cross of ashes on our foreheads. This year we might need to focus more on conforming what is on the inside with what is not easily seen on the outside. Then again, the works of charity or penance that we do on that day will last much longer than any smudge of ashes.



**What to expect:** The minister will carefully sprinkle a small amount of the blessed ashes on top of the head.

**What to do:** Please bow your head as much as possible. Wear dark clothes if possible. You may remove your glasses or leave them on. Please wear your mask at all times.

**REMEMBER:** The faithful are not obligated to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday. Please remember the importance of Pray Fast Give.