

Although Ash Wednesday is not a Catholic Holy Day of Obligation, it is an important part of the Christian Season of Lent. The first clear evidence of Ash Wednesday is around 960CE.

Ash Wednesday **Our Shifting Understanding of Lent**

Those who work with liturgy in parishes know that some of the largest crowds in the year will show up to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday. Though this is not a holy day of obligation in our tradition, many people would not think of letting Ash Wednesday go by without a trip to the church to be marked with an ashen cross on their foreheads.

How did this practice become such an important part of the lives of so many believers? Those who do not share our customs often make a point of telling us that we have something on our foreheads, assuming we would want to wash it off, but many Catholics wear that smudge faithfully all day.

Ashes in the Bible

The origin of the custom of using ashes in religious ritual is lost in the mists of pre-history, but we find references to the practice in our own religious tradition in the Old Testament. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, calls for repentance this way: "O daughter of my people, gird on sackcloth, roll in the ashes" (Jeremiah 6:26).

The prophet Isaiah, on the other hand, critiques the use of sackcloth and ashes as inadequate to please God, but in the process he indicates that this practice was well-known in Israel: "Is this the manner of fasting I wish, of keeping a day of penance: that a man bow his head like a reed, and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?" (Isaiah 58:5).

The prophet Daniel pleaded for God to rescue Israel with sackcloth and ashes as a sign of Israel's repentance: "I turned to the Lord God, pleading in earnest prayer, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes" (Daniel 9:3).

Perhaps the best known example of repentance in the Old Testament also involves sackcloth and ashes. When the prophet Jonah finally obeyed God's command and preached in the great city of Nineveh, his preaching was amazingly effective. Word of his message was carried to the king of Nineveh. "When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes" (Jonah 3:6).

In the Book of Judith, we find acts of repentance that specify that the ashes were put on people's heads: "And all the Israelite men, women and children who lived in Jerusalem prostrated themselves in front of the temple building, with ashes strewn on their heads, displaying their sackcloth covering before the Lord" (Judith 4:11; see also 4:15 and 9:1).

Just prior to the New Testament period, the rebels fighting for Jewish independence, the Maccabees, prepared for battle using ashes: "That day they fasted and wore sackcloth; they

sprinkled ashes on their heads and tore their clothes" (1 Maccabees 3:47; see also 4:39).

In the New Testament, Jesus refers to the use of sackcloth and ashes as signs of repentance: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have repented in sackcloth and ashes" (Matthew 11:21, Luke 10:13).

Ashes in the History of the Church

Despite all these references in Scripture, the use of ashes in the Church left only a few records in the first millennium of Church history. Thomas Talley, an expert on the history of the liturgical year, says that the first clearly datable liturgy for Ash Wednesday that provides for sprinkling ashes is in the Romano-Germanic pontifical of 960. Before that time, ashes had been used as a sign of admission to the Order of Penitents. As early as the sixth century, the Spanish Mozarabic rite calls for signing the forehead with ashes when admitting a gravely ill person to the Order of Penitents. At the beginning of the 11th century, Abbot Aelfric notes that it was customary for all the faithful to take part in a ceremony on the Wednesday before Lent that included the imposition of ashes. Near the end of that century, Pope Urban II called for the general use of ashes on that day. Only later did this day come to be called Ash Wednesday.

In the 12th century the rule developed that the ashes were to be created by burning palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday. Many parishes today invite parishioners to bring such palms to church before Lent begins and have a ritual burning of the palms after Mass.

The Order of Penitents

It seems, then, that our use of ashes at the beginning of Lent is an extension of the use of ashes with those entering the Order of Penitents. This discipline was the way the Sacrament of Penance was celebrated through most of the first millennium of Church history. Those who had committed serious sins confessed their sins to the bishop or his representative and were assigned a penance that was to be carried out over a period of time. After completing their penance, they were reconciled by the bishop with a prayer of absolution offered in the midst of the community.

During the time they worked out their penances, the penitents often had special places in church and wore special garments to indicate their status. Like the catechumens who were preparing for Baptism, they were often dismissed from the Sunday assembly after the Liturgy of the Word.

This whole process was modeled on the conversion journey of the catechumens, because the Church saw falling into serious sin after Baptism as an indication that a person had not really been converted. Penance was a second attempt to foster that conversion.

Lent developed in the Church as the whole community prayed and fasted for the catechumens who were preparing for Baptism. At the same time, those members of the community who were already baptized prepared to renew their baptismal promises at Easter, thus joining the catechumens in seeking to deepen their own conversion. It was natural, then, that the Order of Penitents also focused on Lent, with reconciliation often being celebrated on Holy Thursday, so

that the newly reconciled could share in the liturgies of the Triduum. With Lent clearly a season focused on Baptism, Penance found a home there as well.

Shifting Understanding of Lent

With the gradual disappearance of the Order of Penitents, the use of ashes became detached from its original context. The focus on personal penance and the Sacrament of Penance continued in Lent, but the connection to Baptism was no longer obvious to most people. This is reflected in the formula that came to be associated with the distribution of ashes: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return." This emphasis on mortality fit well with the medieval experience of life, when the threat of death was always at hand. Many people died very young, and the societal devastation of the plague made death even more prevalent.

Ash Wednesday After Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) called for the renewal of Lent, recovering its ancient baptismal character. This recovery was significantly advanced by the restoration of the catechumenate mandated by the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (1972). As Catholics have increasingly interacted with catechumens in the final stage of their preparation for Baptism, they have begun to understand Lent as a season of baptismal preparation and baptismal renewal.

Since Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, it naturally is also beginning to recover a baptismal focus. One hint of this is the second formula that is offered for the imposition of ashes: "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel." It is a clear call to conversion, to that movement away from sin and toward Christ that we have to embrace over and over again through our lives.

As the beginning of Lent, Ash Wednesday calls us to the conversion journey that marks the season. As the catechumens enter the final stage of their preparation for the Easter sacraments, we are all called to walk with them so that we will be prepared to renew our baptismal promises when Easter arrives.

The Readings for Ash Wednesday

The readings assigned to Ash Wednesday highlight this call to conversion. The first reading from the prophet Joel is a clarion call to return to the Lord "with fasting, and weeping and mourning." Joel reminds us that our God is "gracious and merciful...slow to anger, rich in kindness and relenting in punishment," thus inviting us to trust in God's love as we seek to renew our life with God. It is important to note that Joel does not call only for individual conversion. His appeal is to the whole people, so he commands: "Blow the trumpet in Zion, proclaim a fast, call an assembly; gather the people, notify the congregation; assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast." As we enter this season of renewal, we are united with all of God's people, for we all share the need for continued conversion and we are called to support one another on the journey. Imitating those who joined the Order of Penitents in ages past, we all become a community of penitents seeking to grow closer to God

through repentance and renewal.

With a different tone but no less urgency, St. Paul implores us in the second reading to "be reconciled to God." "Now," he insists, "is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." The time to return to the Lord is now.

The Gospel for Ash Wednesday gives us good advice on how we are to act during Lent. Jesus speaks of the three main disciplines of the season: giving alms, praying and fasting. All of these spiritual activities, Jesus teaches us, are to be done without any desire for recognition by others. The point is not that we should only pray alone and not in community, for example, but that we should not pray in order to be seen as holy. The same is true of fasting and works of charity; they do not need to be hidden but they are to be done out of love of God and neighbor, not in order to be seen by others.

There is a certain irony that we use this Gospel, which tells us to wash our faces so that we do not appear to be doing penance on the day that we go around with "dirt" on our foreheads. This is just another way Jesus is telling us not to perform religious acts for public recognition. We don't wear the ashes to proclaim our holiness but to acknowledge that we are a community of sinners in need of repentance and renewal.

From Ashes to the Font

The call to continuing conversion reflected in these readings is also the message of the ashes. We move through Lent from ashes to the baptismal font. We dirty our faces on Ash Wednesday and are cleansed in the waters of the font. More profoundly, we embrace the need to die to sin and selfishness at the beginning of Lent so that we can come to fuller life in the Risen One at Easter.

When we receive ashes on our foreheads, we remember who we are. We remember that we are creatures of the earth ("Remember that you are dust"). We remember that we are mortal beings ("and to dust you will return"). We remember that we are baptized. We remember that we are people on a journey of conversion ("Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel"). We remember that we are members of the body of Christ (and that smudge on our foreheads will proclaim that identity to others, too).

Renewing our sense of who we really are before God is the core of the Lenten experience. It is so easy to forget, and thus we fall into habits of sin, ways of thinking and living that are contrary to God's will. In this we are like the Ninevites in the story of Jonah. It was "their wickedness" that caused God to send Jonah to preach to them. Jonah resisted that mission and found himself in deep water. Rescued by a large fish, Jonah finally did God's bidding and began to preach in Nineveh. His preaching obviously fell on open ears and hearts, for in one day he prompted the conversion of the whole city. If we open our ears and hearts to that same word, we will be like the Ninevites in our conversion to the Lord. That, simply put, is the point of Ash Wednesday!

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