

ASH WEDNESDAY 2021

I would like to begin my reflection by reading a portion of Pope Francis' homily on Ash Wednesday last year:

"We begin the Lenten season by receiving ashes: 'You are dust, and unto dust you shall return.' The dust sprinkled on our heads brings us back to earth; it reminds that we are weak frail, and mortal. Centuries and millennia pass, and we come and go; before the immensity of galaxies and space, we are nothing. We are dust in the universe."

"Yet, we are dust that is loved by God. It pleased the Lord to gather that dust in his hands and breathe into it the breath of life. We are thus a dust that is precious, destined for eternal life. We are the dust of the earth upon which God has poured out his heaven, the dust that contains God's dreams. We are God's hope, his treasure, and his glory."

End quote.

What a beautiful reminder: "we are dust that is loved by God."

And it is because God loves us that we have been given once again this special time of the holy season of Lent.

I read an article that asked the question: With all that we have already "given up" because of COVID, do we really need Lent this year?

Of course the answer is "Yes."

Perhaps more than ever because of the pandemic we have been reminded of the frailty of our human condition and the shortness of life here on earth.

The disciplines of Lent - prayer, fasting, and almsgiving - help us look into our hearts to discover where we are still in need of repentance and conversion.

For many centuries the manner of the imposition of ashes was sprinkling them over the head of each person.

This continues to be the practice in Rome and in many other places throughout Europe today.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, out of an abundance of caution, the Vatican has decreed that this is to be the manner of distribution of the ashes this year.

After I bless the ashes I will say the words, "Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return" once.

Then I and the ministers of Communion will sprinkle a small amount of ash over each person's bowed head.

I have always wondered why we marked our foreheads with ashes when, as we heard in the Gospel, Jesus tells us: "Wash your face so that no one will know that you are fasting."

However, over the centuries it has become a powerful sensory experience to have gritty ashes smeared on our skin ... And the cross made on our foreheads can be a counter-cultural sign to others of the need for conversion.

But this year, one of the penances we are being called to is obedience to the Vatican directive.

Receiving ashes is optional, so if you don't want ashes sprinkled over your head you don't have to come up.

We do all of this remembering those beautiful words of Pope Francis: "We are dust that is loved by God."

You and I are dust into which God has breathed his hopes and dreams.

You and I are dust for which God has given his Son.