

Ashes Symbolizing Lent

When thinking of Lent, most people, especially Catholics, see ashes as symbolic of this period of the Church's liturgical year. What makes ashes especially indicative of this forty-day period? As usual with many church practices, ashes did not become a Lenten symbol by some church 'fiat' of many centuries ago. Rather, this association developed over the centuries, even tracing its origins as far back as ancient biblical times described in the Hebrew testament.

We tend to think of ashes as a particularly Christian symbol associated with Lent, when in fact historically, it can also be found in many Eastern religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Moreover, its symbolism carries with it many different meanings. For our purposes, this article is limited to its association to the Christian (Catholic) use of ashes.

First, it is helpful to know the etymology of the word we know as 'ash.' It derives from ancient Germanic/Norse word to 'burn' that later became the word to describe the powdery remains of what was burned – ashes. It also is a translation of the ancient Hebrew word for "burn or dust or nothingness." One can then begin to understand why "ash" came to symbolize the season of Lent.

Scripture scholars find mention of ashes in the Books of Esther, Job and Daniel. The word "ash" in these cases was frequently used along with "sackcloth." Thus, these scriptural examples provide historic evidence and a common understanding of the recognized practice and symbolic value of using ashes.

In the Christian Testament, Jesus himself mentioned ashes. Referring to towns that refused to repent of sin even though they saw the miracles and heard the gospel, Jesus says: "If the miracles worked in you had taken place in Tyre and Sidon, they would have reformed in sackcloth and ashes long ago" (Matthew 11:21).

In the early church, the use of ashes was continued for the same symbolic reasons as understood in the Hebrew scriptures. Tertullian (160-220AD) and Eusebius (260-340AD) refer to ashes being used in referring to sinners and to those Christians who left the Church (apostates) and wished to return. And writings during this period made mention of priests who "**sprinkled**" ashes upon those who came for confession.

Then, in the Middle Ages (7th through 15th century), records note that priests, ministering to a dying person, frequently "**sprinkled**" the person with ashes saying the words: "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." Thus, the **sprinkling** of ashes was a common occurrence in the life of a Christian person, whether penitent and/or dying. It clearly bespoke the symbolism of sorrow, both in mortality -- and repentance.

During this period, the Gregorian sacramentary tells us that ashes came to be used to mark the beginning of Lent. Other books also mention that Aelfric (an Anglo-Saxon priest) preached about how men in the ancient biblical times "repented of their sins and bestrewed themselves with ashes and clothed themselves in sackcloth." Thus, it became standard practice in the

Church to symbolize the penitential nature of Lent with the sign most emblematic of mourning, mortality and penance – the sprinkling of ashes. For centuries then, Christians were very familiar with the practice of sprinkling of ashes in association with sin and death. No surprise then that in 1091, the Council of Benevento made it a Church rule to impose ashes on all Christians at the beginning of Lent. Thus, we have what is now called “Ash Wednesday.”

The ritual for the imposition of ashes was then included in the 16th century Tridentine reform formalized in the *Missale Romanum* of Pope Paul V. This traditional practice for Ash Wednesday was carried over into the revised missal emanating from the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. This missal of Pope Paul VI stipulates in the Mass instructions for Ash Wednesday that: “The priest *places* ashes on the head of those present who come to him.” Notice the word “**places**” which leaves it open as to how this “places” is actually done. But, as we all know the historic practice in the U.S. has been to **sign** the forehead of each person with the ashes, whereas in several other countries “sprinkling on the head” has been the normal practice.

On January 12, 2021, the Vatican Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship issued a notice regarding the distribution of ashes on Ash Wednesday (Feb 17, 2021). The notice states that: “After blessing the ashes and sprinkling them with holy water in silence, the priest addresses those present, reciting once the formula found in the Roman Missal: ‘Repent, and believe in the Gospel’ or ‘Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’” Then, the note continues: “the priest cleanses his hands, puts on a face mask, and distributes ashes to those who come to him. He then **sprinkles** the ashes on each person’s head ‘without saying anything.’” Notice the Vatican instruction stipulates the word “sprinkle” rather than “impose” on the forehead. In a sense, this would seem to revert to the more ancient practice of sprinkling ashes.



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References: Thomas Talley: *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*; Adolph Adam: *The Liturgical Year*; Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship: *General Instruction to the Roman Missal* (GIRM)