

ASH WEDNESDAY ASHES DURING A TIME OF PANDEMIC

Many have asked for guidelines regarding the Ash Wednesday Service during a time of pandemic, specifically requesting guidance regarding the Imposition of Ashes. So here I seek to offer such guidance; I wish to express my gratitude to Bishop J. Neil Alexander, former Bishop of the Diocese of Atlanta and former Dean of the School of Theology at the University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee, where he is currently professor of liturgy and the Quintard Professor of Theology. Dr. Alexander recently prepared a paper for the House of Bishops entitled “A Note on Ash Wednesday and the Imposition of Ashes in a Time of Pandemic.” My own proffered guidance is formulated after reading this paper.

It is important to appreciate, at the outset, that as many clergy have noted and as Dr. Alexander points out, the imposition of ashes during the Ash Wednesday liturgy is optional. Indeed, the rubric on page 265 of the Book of Common Prayer states, “*If ashes are to be imposed...*,” underscoring the principle that the imposition of ashes during the Ash Wednesday service is neither mandatory nor essential. It is, however, a significant, beloved ritual for many. Its tactile nature is in keeping with our incarnational faith. It should therefore not be eliminated without offering some meaningful substitute.

In reviewing the reasons we impose ashes and the historic significance of the ritual, Bishop Alexander highlights two that are primary. The first is that we impose ashes to signal enrollment in Lent – our decision to walk the way of Lent to Easter. The second is that the sign of the cross on our foreheads effects a ritualization of our mortality, which we should always remember.

The earliest historical evidence of enrolling penitents in a Lenten discipline was in 5th century Rome; however no ashes appear to have been used. The first recorded use of ashes was in 10th century Germany, when penitents had their heads *sprinkled* with ashes, not *imposed*. During this sprinkling, there was a reading of Genesis 3:19-20 which includes the words, “*...until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*” Such a ritual does indeed point to the keeping of our death and mortality ever before us.

When ashes began to be imposed on the forehead rather than sprinkled, many drew a connection between the sign of the cross made at the imposition to the sign of the cross marked with oil on our forehead at our Baptism. This parallel holds in tension our approaching mortality along with the promise of new life. When we impose ashes along with the words, “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” we ritualize this remembrance of our mortality. And why should we ritualize our approaching mortality? The answer may lie in the words of St. Benedict who counseled his monks to “keep death daily before their eyes.” We are called to remember that death comes but that it does not have the last word. Whether we connect ourselves back to the earth through ashes that are imposed or sprinkled, we are reminiscent of the dirt that is cast on our remains at burial. And there at the grave, we are reminded to make our song, “Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!”

ASH WEDNESDAY WORSHIP GUIDELINES

As **Ash Wednesday** approaches (February 17th), **the ongoing suspension of all in-person indoor church activities including worship unfortunately must remain in effect.**

Outdoor worship, however, is permitted subject to the following protocols for the safety of all: identify a suitable outdoor location, limit the length of the service to 30 minutes, limit the number assembled to no more than 25, maintain 6-foot physical distancing, and require all to wear masks. Prayer responses should be limited or omitted. Instrumental music is permissible but congregational singing is not permitted. Singers, wearing singers masks and situated 30 feet from worshipers or behind Plexiglas screens, may sing on behalf of the congregation.

Some Suggestions for the Imposition of Ashes or a Suitable Substitute:

- The actual imposition of ashes is discouraged as the observance of proper physical distancing would be difficult to maintain. However, if ashes are imposed, the one who imposes them must thoroughly clean and sanitize hands between each worshiper or worshiper's residential unit. This requirement may make the imposition of ashes impractical.
- Individual packets of ashes may be assembled and distributed to worshipers or disseminated ahead of time to homes. Members of households or even those who live alone may impose them on themselves or on each other, using the appointed prayers in the BCP on page 265 along with other prayers and Psalms from the Ash Wednesday service, especially Psalm 51. Ashes may also be reserved in the home and used later as part of a pre-recorded or live-streamed service.

Individual packets of ashes are available from several sources, including:

- Palm Gardens, Inc. <https://www.palmgardensinc.com/> Note: you cannot order from the website, but must contact them via the phone number on the website (866-215-4670)
- Cokesbury offers smaller containers of ashes, suitable for families:
<https://www.cokesbury.com/788200471317-Palm-Leaf-Ashes-10-Grams-Package-Services-100?psri=23740872>

If you want to package ashes yourselves, smaller Ziploc bead or pill packages are available either in pharmacies or through Amazon:

https://www.amazon.com/Plymor-Zipper-Reclosable-Plastic-White/dp/B003ZZY9F4/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?crid=36ARSEUPA0GLA&dchild=1&keywords=bead+ziplock+bags+2x2&qid=1611660703&sprefix=bead+zip%2Caps%2C160&sr=8-1-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEzUDQ3SENNQlozSTBXJmVuY3J5cHRIZEIkPUEwMzlwNDEyMU1ENEgxMFZBQkhSSSzIbmNyeXB0ZWRBZEIkPUEwNDQ3Nzk1MU1MTEZYQzNVVE1JViZ3aWRnZXROYW1IPXNwX2F0ZiZhY3Rpb249Y2xpY2tSZWRpcmVjdCZkb05vdExvZONsaWNrPXRydWU

- Clergy may also consider using the ancient method of sprinkling of ashes on heads, so as to avoid the tactile risks of imposition. Worshipers may also sprinkle ashes on their own heads.
- If the preparation and distribution of ashes ahead of time is too onerous or impractical, worshipers may be encouraged to procure dirt from their own gardens or yards for either imposition or sprinkling. It is, after all, to the dust that we shall return.

A Word about “Ashes to Go”:

This popular adaptation of the Imposition of Ashes, given its tactile nature, is not safe during a pandemic and is discouraged. However, individual packets of ashes along with prayer cards outlining the process for self-imposition or imposition within family units may be distributed publicly. Be sure any literature distributed contains information for how to access any virtual worship that you offer.

In Conclusion:

At the heart of Ash Wednesday worship is the invitation, in the name of the Church, "to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word." Although many will grieve the infeasibility of safely imposing ashes in the customary way this year, the Church's invitation to the observance of a holy Lent, combined with support for the self-imposition of ashes, will enable the faithful hear the summons to enter the season with purpose, bearing in mind "the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith."