

Why do Catholics put Ashes on our heads on Ash Wednesday?

Over forty passages in the Bible associate ashes with mourning and grief. In Old Testament times people used ashes as a sign of repentance. They would sit in ashes, roll around in them, sprinkle them upon their heads, or even mingle them with their food and drink. They did this as an outward sign of their inward posture of repentance. Check out Daniel 9:3-6, for an example.

A Traditional Response

Ashes are a sign of physical death, as in 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust.' We began as dust (a joyless and lifeless existence), and our bodies will return to dust until we are raised up by Christ. By receiving ashes and keeping them on, we publicly proclaim our intent to die to our worldly desires and live even more in Christ's image, which we focus on during the season of 'rebirth' that is Lent (a Latin term for 'Spring').

The Historical Response

For over twelve hundred years on the *dies cinerum* (day of ashes) faithful followers have approached the altar and received ashes upon their foreheads. These ashes are made from the burnt palm fronds that were blessed on the Palm Sunday of the previous year. The ashes are sprinkled with holy water, usually fragrancd with incense and blessed using four prayers that are thousands of years old.

The Symbolic Response

God formed Adam out of the 'dust' of the earth, which we read about in Genesis 2:7. In addition, Jesus healed the blind man with clay (earth and spit) in John 9:6. We mark ourselves with ashes as a 'new beginning' at the onset of Lent, allowing the life of Jesus Christ to make us whole and new again.

The Most Basic Response

I'm a sinner. I don't always love God as strongly as I could or as directly as I should. Ash Wednesday reminds me that it is only through God that I have life; He gave it to me.

Ash Wednesday also begins my preparation for Holy Week and the Passion and Resurrection of my Lord, Jesus, without Whom I have no life here and no chance at eternal life in Heaven. This is just a great opportunity for me to get better.

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