

The following is a condensed version of an article by Father Michael Van Sloun, pastor of St. Bartholomew in Wayzata, that first appeared in 2008 in The Catholic Spirit.

The imposition of ashes is a solemn ritual that signals the beginning of the holy season of Lent. The ceremony is distinctive; there is no liturgical action like it throughout the entire church year.

The ashes come from a previous Palm Sunday. The palms are burned, the ashes collected and then crushed into a fine, sooty powder and placed into bowls.

The ashes are blessed by the priest during the Ash Wednesday Mass — March 5 this year — after the homily. Then, in a Communion-like procession, people are invited to come forward and the ashes are applied to each person's forehead in the shape of a cross as the minister says either, "Turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15), the usual prayer, or "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19), the older, more traditional invocation.

Ashes symbolize two main things in the Old Testament.

Death, repentance

Ashes are equivalent to dust, and human flesh is composed of dust or clay (Genesis 2:7), and when a human corpse decomposes, it returns to dust or ash.

For example, Abraham told God, "I am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27), a reference to his human mortality. Jeremiah described death as a "valley of corpses and ashes" (Jeremiah 31:40). Ashes are an ominous sign, and we use them on Ash Wednesday to remind ourselves of our own impending deaths. Death may come sooner, or it may come later, but it will surely come.

And if death is coming, we need to be prepared, and the time to prepare for death is now, and the way to prepare is to live according to God's ways.

When the prophet Daniel shamefacedly clothed himself in sackcloth and ashes, they were a sign of his people's contrition for their rebellion, wickedness and treachery (Daniel 9:3).

When Jonah warned the Ninevites that God planned to destroy their city because of their corruption and depravity, the people covered themselves with sackcloth and ashes as a sign of their intention to turn from their evil ways (Jonah 3:6,10).

Ashes are a plea to God for mercy and compassion, pardon and forgiveness.

Moreover, they are a public admission of guilt, an expression of sorrow for sins that have been committed, a promise to reform and a pledge to resist temptation in the future.

We, too, are sinners. When we come forward to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday, we are saying that we are sorry for our sins, and that we want to use the season of Lent to correct our faults, purify our hearts, control our desires and grow in holiness so we will be prepared to celebrate Easter with great joy.