

# The Symbolism of Ash Wednesday

By Sister Margaret Deegan, RSM

Although for the past 800 years Ash Wednesday has been universally celebrated with the receiving of ashes, its specific origin is not easy to discern. This is because it is closely linked with the development of Lent which was observed for different lengths of time in different places over a number of centuries. The importance of Ash Wednesday, consequently, is not found in its historical beginnings, but in the significance of receiving ashes.

## INSIGHTS On Pastoral Liturgy

The ashes of burnt objects have been seen to have religious significance since the beginning of man. Dust and ashes are often interchangeably or together to

point out the mortality and insignificance of man — especially in his relationship to an all-powerful and all-holy God. In the book of Genesis, man is described as being made from dust, and Abraham describes himself as being made of dust and ashes. (Gen 2:7, 18:27)

Throughout the Old Testament we find references to the use of ashes as signs of sorrow and repentance. In the book of Esther, when an edict proclaimed that all Jews must be killed, we find first Mordecai and then all the Jews expressing their sorrow in this way: "When Mordecai learned what had happened, he tore his garments and put on sackcloth and ashes among all the Jews there was great fasting, weeping and wailing, and many lay on sackcloth and ashes." (Esther 4:1, 4:3)

On another occasion we read: "All the Israelites in Jerusalem, including the women and children, lay prone in front of the Temple, and with ashes on their heads stretched out their hands before the Lord." (Judith 4:11)

Job expresses both his insignificance and willingness to repent by saying: "I retract all I have said, and in dust and ashes I repent." (Job 42:6)

Sometimes the whole body was covered with ashes; other times people simply sprinkled them on their heads. Some sat or lay in them. Whatever the mode of expression, the meaning was the same: to call attention to the need for repentance and conversion.

Our Christian usage stems clearly from these Jewish roots. In the days when sinners performed public penance, they would clothe themselves in sackcloth and ashes as an expression of their sorrow for sin and their desire to return to the Christian community. In this way they did penance for their sins and at the same time called to the attention of the whole Christian community its need to pray for sinners. Thus, ashes had a two-fold effect: sinners witnessed to their need for prayer and penance, and through that witness, the Christian community was called to commit itself more strongly to the Christian life of prayer and service.

The sacramentary offers the priest a choice of exhortations to be used during the distribution of ashes. One accents the mortality of man: "Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return." The other accents conversion: "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel."

The receiving of ashes in our times is meant to be a very powerful symbol for us as members of the Christian Community. It calls our attention to the beginning of a new season in the Church. The concept of beginnings is being given more and more attention by anthropologists and liturgists alike. We all need to feel that point of differentiation between what has been and what is going to be. The

traditional New Year's eve Party is an excellent example with its reflections on the past and its new year's resolutions. Birthdays have similar significance. These times provide us with the extra energy a new beginning enables us to muster, and the sense of progress which can be measured from a given moment in time. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent and in so doing initiates us into a spirit of prayer and fasting that calls us to renew our commitment to the Christian life.

Receiving ashes is a proclamation to fellow Christians and to the world that the individual has sinned and needs to do penance, yet it goes far beyond the recognition of this fact. It is at the same time a promise to enter a period of repentance and conversion of heart that will continue until the renewal of baptismal vows at the Easter Vigil.

The significance of Ash Wednesday, therefore, goes beyond the day and extends itself to the whole period of Lent with which it is integrally connected. The cross of ashes signed on our foreheads is not only a visible sign of our commitment to grow in the Christian life but also points to our hope in Christ who has already won the victory over sin.

## Parish, School Sponsor Lenten Series on Life

A Lenten series titled "Life Is Worth Living" will be presented over a four-week period beginning at 8 p.m. Wednesday, March 10, at Cardinal Mooney High School Auditorium, 800 Maiden Lane.

The program is being sponsored by the Theology Department of Cardinal Mooney and the Human Development Committee of Mother of Sorrows Parish.

The series will present discussion on issues pertaining to life in America today and in the future.

Prominent speakers from the Rochester Area Right to Life Education Fund will supplement their presentation with films and slides. Appropriate reading material will be available for those attending.

The following subjects will be covered:

March 10 — "Death with Dignity and the Euthanasia Movement"

March 17 — "Appreciating the Handicapped."

March 24 — "World of the Unborn and Abortion."

March 31 — "Legal Aspects of Abortion and Alternatives to Abortion."

Each Wednesday's presentation and discussion will begin at 8 p.m. The public is invited and there is no charge.

### FOREMAN CENTER PREPARES FEAST

Staff and students of the Foreman Center, 41 O'Connor Rd., Fairport, are making 400 pounds of meatballs and 250 gallons of Italian sauce for the center's annual spaghetti dinner to be held Saturday, March 6, from noon to 8 p.m. Proceeds from the dinner will bolster a fund for a therapeutic swimming pool.

## WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mk. 1:12-15, (R1) Gn. 9:8-15, (R2) 1 Pt. 3:18-12)

Sunday is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent lasts from Ash Wednesday until the start of the evening Mass on Holy Thursday. Passiontide has been suppressed. The Lenten Sundays number one to five. The sixth Sunday begins Holy Week and is called Passion or Palm Sunday.

The Lenten Season has a two-fold character: (1) it recalls baptism and prepares for it, and (2) it stresses a penitential spirit.

The theme of Covenant runs all through the first readings of the Sundays of Lent. Last week we explained what covenant was. It was a pact with man, initiated by God. God's purpose in making a covenant with man was to invite him to a relationship of friendship with Himself. Covenant is a revelation that God loves us and seeks our friendship. We know what a marriage covenant is — a man and a woman vow to love each other till death. Similarly, covenant establishes a relationship between God and man akin to marriage. It demands loyalty, fidelity, and steadfastness ( *stead*, in Hebrew) to God. God, who is changeless, always keeps His part of the pact — He is faithful. But man, who is fickle, often fails to keep his part of the bargain. Hence the need for penance.

In the first readings, man's original sin climaxes in the utter degeneration of mankind. So God destroys all, but spares the merciful waters of the flood. After the flood, God renews His covenant with Noah never to destroy man by water. The sign of His pact is the rainbow — a sign of peace, because the arrow of the bow (His anger) would point heavenward and not toward the earth. When a gunslinger surrenders, he hands his gun to the sheriff with the barrel facing himself.

St. Peter saw in the Flood the symbol of baptism. We might ask how? Does baptism destroy? Baptism destroys sin just as the Flood destroyed the wicked. Have you ever wondered what saved Noah: the ark or the waters? Both of course, but more important — the waters. The Flood destroyed the wicked. Had the wicked not been destroyed, Noah most likely would have become wicked himself. "Evil associations corrupt good manners." "The scepter of the wicked," sang the psalmist, "was removed, lest the good turn their hands to wickedness."

In the gospel, we have the Marcan account of our Lord's temptations. His account is brief, not blown up as by Matthew and Luke. As after the Flood, Noah began all over again, so with Christ man can start all over again — and, St. Peter tells us, the new beginning starts with water, the waters of baptism.

Through baptism God makes a new covenant with us. When, unlike Jesus, we succumb to the temptations of the devil, we rupture this new relationship. That is why we need penance again and again. The new rite of penance is meant to be a prayerful, heartfelt, earnest renewal of our baptismal commitment.

One of the greatest benefits of reconquering the sacrament of reconciliation is that it keeps the faculty of effort alive — as does the renewal of marriage vows.

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