

Insights in Liturgy

By Father Robert J. Kennedy

Ashes: Who and Why?

Every year, when Ash Wednesday rolls around, the Liturgy Office receives many inquiries about who can distribute and who should receive blessed ashes. Confusion arises because parishes have differing practices.

Fortunately, the January 1980 "Newsletter" of the U.S. Bishop's Committee on the Liturgy comes to our help in resolving this confusion. It states clearly that the minister for the blessing of ashes is always a bishop or priest. But according to a response from the Congregation for Divine Worship (Jan. 1975) other persons may assist the bishop or priest in imposition of ashes at the Ash Wednesday Eucharist or liturgy of the word, or to the sick and shut-in. These others include deacons, special ministers of communion, pastoral assistants, and other lay persons, when there is a true pastoral need.

It couldn't be any clearer about who can distribute ashes, but there is no guidance about who should receive them. Specifically, should infants and small children be presented for the imposition of ashes? Maybe a look at why ashes are given will help us to see who should be receiving them.

Our present ceremony for the distribution of ashes is merely a relic of the solemn ceremony performed in the

early centuries of the Church for public penitents (those who committed grave, public sins like murder, apostasy, adultery and so on). The bishop clothed the penitents in sackcloth, sprinkled them with ashes, expelled them from the church and excommunicated them from the eucharistic table—sometimes for a period of several years. During this time the penitents performed works of prayer, mortification and fasting in satisfaction for their sins, and were reconciled with the imposition of hands and a return to the Eucharist.

During the Middle Ages, penances were softened and assigned privately. But the faithful throughout the centuries have voluntarily dedicated themselves to the practice of penance by receiving ashes at the beginning of the Lenten season. The acceptance of ashes was their declaration of intent that they would spend the next six weeks in interior, spiritual renewal through prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The ashes were and are a sign of what our baptismal consecration with Christ had become through our sin: dry, sterile, without fire or life.

Thus, the acceptance of ashes declares our intention to live a season of healing and growth, a time to revitalize our baptismal consecration. It is our summons to die with Christ so that we might live with him. It is the challenge to whip the dry, cold ashes of our sinful life into the bright, warm fire of Holy Saturday, risen life. That is why the

imposition of ashes is more happily made with the formula "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel," rather than the more familiar "Remember, man, you are dust."

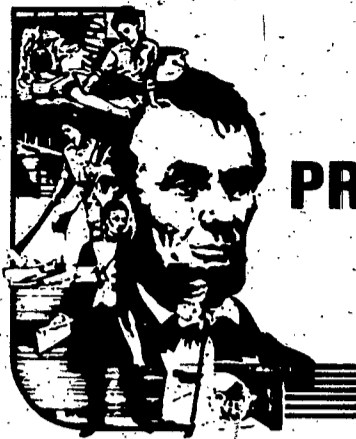
In effect we say to one another "Turn to God and taste his mercy." Even though our sin has hurt the body of Christ which is the Church, we undertake our penance with the desire to heal the body of Christ. And our penance is wrapped in confidence. The entrance antiphon for Ash Wednesday says it clearly: "Lord, you are merciful to all, and hate nothing you have created. You overlook the sins of your people and bring them to repentance. You are the Lord our God." The Lord desires that his mercy be with us, and so the fruit of dry, sterile ashes can be wonderfully rich!

All this describes why we distribute ashes each year. But the question still remains: who should present themselves for ashes?

If Ash Wednesday is a declaration of intent to renew the life of baptism within us, then it is obvious that infants and those children who have not yet reached the age of first Penance, have no need for such an intention. Ashes are likewise not for those who have no intention of taking advantage of the Lenten renewal: empty gestures are worse than no gestures at all.

Ashes are only for those who wholeheartedly intend to turn from sin and become more faithful to the gospel.

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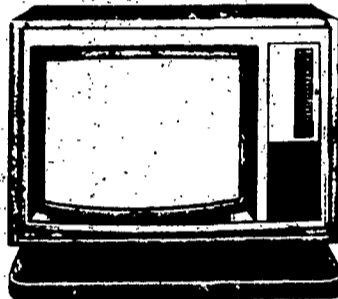
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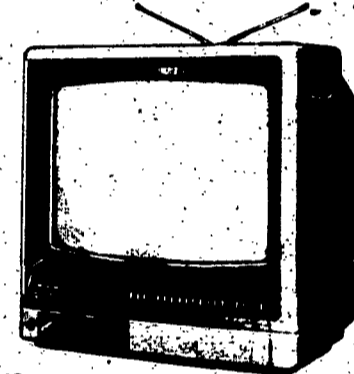
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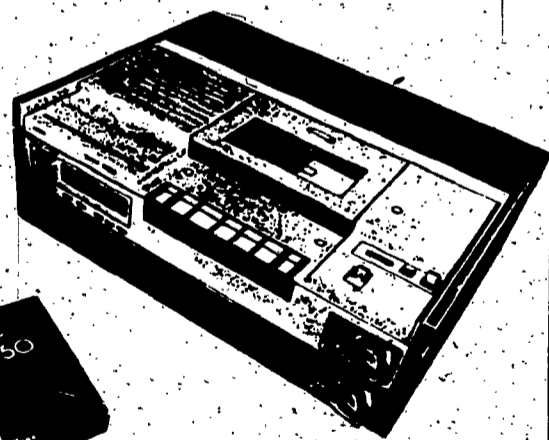
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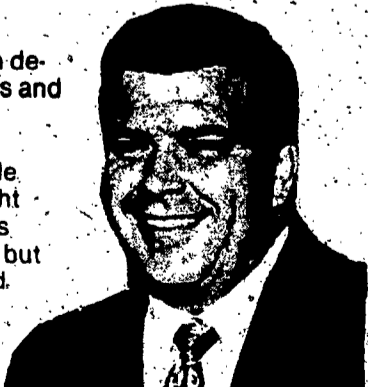
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