

FEBRUARY 17: ASH WEDNESDAY

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has also issued a memo, intended as a mandate for all Latin Rite churches, on the manner in which to impose ashes on the faithful this year. The letter calls for ashes to be given according to the ancient custom of sprinkling the ashes on the crown of the head rather than using a thumb or other instrument to trace a cross on individual's foreheads. The practice of sprinkling, rather than tracing a cross, is quite common in Europe, even though we may not have had much exposure to it in the US. The Congregation acknowledged that "While Ash Wednesday is not a holyday of obligation and while there is no requirement for the clergy and faithful to receive the imposition of ashes, it is rightly observed as a celebration of high importance, and many will surely wish to participate even amid the current difficulties."

The instructions state (emphasis added):

- The Priest says the prayer for blessing the ashes. He sprinkles the ashes with holy water, without saying anything.
- Then he addresses all those present and only once says the formula as it appears in the Roman Missal, applying it to all in general:

“Repent, and believe in the Gospel”, or

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

- The Priest then cleanses his hands, puts on a face mask, and distributes the ashes to those who come to him or, if appropriate, he goes to those who are standing in their places. The Priest takes the ashes and sprinkles them on the head of each one without saying anything.

The best description of this “sprinkling” is that it is similar to when you are adding a bit of salt to a food – the ashes are pinched between the thumb and forefinger and rubbed so that they are dusted into the hair or crown of the recipient. This is NOT like a Sprinkling Rite with Holy Water and ashes are not sprayed across the congregation.

Archbishop Cordileone is aware of the deep faith and desire of the people of the Archdiocese and the popularity of Ash Wednesday services. However, in order to minimize exposure and limit large gatherings, other than the regularly scheduled daily Mass (if any), the imposition of ashes should take place outside of Mass, as permitted by the *Roman Missal*.

The *Book of Blessings* (1656-1678) includes the Order of Blessing to be used:

Introductory Rites

Greeting

Opening Prayer (to be taken from the *Roman Missal* and not the *Book of Blessings*)

Reading of the Word of God

Scripture

Responsorial Psalm

Homily

Prayer of Blessing (As noted above, the formula for distributing the ashes is said only once by the priest communally over all present before the distribution.)

Distribution of Ashes

Intercessions (suggested prayers are provided by the *Book of Blessings*, (BB 1674) but parishes may use their own)

Concluding Rite

Please note:

- As in the past, a deacon or lay minister(s) may assist the priest in imposing ashes on the faithful.
- Masks must be worn by everyone, including the ministers, during the distribution of ashes.
- Ministers should sanitize their hands before and after the distribution of ashes.
- Ashes may not be self-imposed; they are always given by a minister.
- An instrument (such as a spoon or shaker) may not be used.
- Local restrictions on gatherings, such as for size of congregation, social distancing, etc. are to be followed for all liturgies.

It will be important for pastors and parish leaders to communicate this change in practice prior to Ash Wednesday, and even before the liturgy itself.

A possible bulletin and church announcement follows:

ASH WEDNESDAY 2021

We have all had a year filled with different ways of living and praying. As we mark the beginning of Lent, we once again need to adapt our practices to preserve the health of all worshippers, while following the ancient traditions of the Church. Therefore, this year, instead of tracing a cross of ashes on the forehead, ashes will be distributed by the ancient custom of sprinkling over the crown of the head. This practice is used extensively in Europe and the Holy See has mandated it be used throughout the world this year.

After the homily, the priest will bless the ashes as usual and recite the invocation over everyone. With masks on, each worshipper will come forward in a line. When you reach the minister, please bow your head slightly and the minister will sprinkle ashes onto the crown of your head. Note that neither the minister nor the receiver says anything. Once you have received ashes, you can return to your seat.

The Archbishop of San Francisco has asked that other than the regularly scheduled daily Mass of the parish, parishes have Liturgies of the Word in order to distribute ashes. This is again a health and safety issue, and completely allowed for by the Rite and the Vatican.