

ASH WEDNESDAY

Remember, man, that thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return!

FIRST PRAYER:

O almighty and eternal God, spare those who are penitent, be merciful to those who supplicate Thee; and vouchsafe to send Thy holy Angel from heaven, to bless and sanctify these ashes, that they may be a wholesome remedy to all who humbly implore Thy holy name, and accuse themselves as a result of the consciousness of their sins, deploring their crimes before Thy divine clemency, or humbly and earnestly beseeching Thy sovereign mercy : and grant through the invocation of Thy most holy name that all who may be sprinkled with them for the remission of their sins may receive health of body and safety of soul. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

SECOND PRAYER:

O God, who desirest not the death of sinners, but rather their repentance, look down most graciously upon the frailty of human nature, and in Thy goodness vouchsafe to bless these ashes which we intend to put upon our heads in token of humility and that we may obtain pardon; that we who know that we are dust, and for the penalty of our guilt must return unto dust, may deserve to obtain of Thy mercy the pardon of all sins, and the rewards promised to penitents. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THIRD PRAYER:

O God, who are moved by humiliation, and appeased by satisfaction : incline the ear of Thy goodness to our prayers, and favorably pour forth upon the heads of Thy servants sprinkled with these ashes the grace of Thy blessing, that Thou mayest both fill them with the spirit of compunction, and effectually grant what they have justly prayed for : and ordain that what Thou hast granted may be permanently established and remain inviolate. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOURTH PRAYER:

Almighty and eternal God, who didst grant the remedy of Thy pardon to the Ninivites doing penance in ashes and sackcloth, mercifully grant that we may so imitate them in our attitude that like them we may obtain forgiveness. Through our Lord. Amen.

THOUGHTS

Then come four prayers which express what the ashes symbolize and how they are to be seen and used by us:

1. To be a spiritual help for all who confess their sins.
2. To secure pardon of sins for those who receive the ashes.
3. To give us the spirit of contrition.
4. To give us the grace and strength to do penance.

When a new Pope processes to St. Peter's Basilica to offer his first Mass as Pope, the procession stops three times and, at each stop, a piece of flax mounted on a reed is burned. As the flames die, the Pope hears the words,

"Pater sancte, sic transit gloria mundi"
("Holy Father, thus passes the glory of the world"),

to remind him not only that he is a mere man, but as a man, a mere mortal whose end is like the end of all other men. The things of this world are passing, and Christians must always keep one eye on the world to come.

Recalling this Truth is one of the principles behind the use of ashes on the forehead today: to remind us that we are mortal, subject to the rot and decay our Western culture now desperately tries to euphemize away, and that we are radically dependent on — solely dependent on — Jesus Christ to overcome this fate.

They are like a yearly contemplation of the tombstone inscribed with:

*Remember friends as you pass by,
as you are now so once was I.
As I am now so you must be.
Prepare for death and follow me.*

While death should, of course, be avoided as the evil it is, we should accept the reality of it with the attitude behind the words attributed to the great Sioux warrior, Crazy Horse:

"It is a good day to die"

Death should not be feared in itself; what should be approached with trepidation is the judgment that follows —not because God is a malicious Father who wants to inflict pain, but because He is as just as He is merciful.

We need to repent, accept the reality of death, and not only consider our judgment, but be ready for it.

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"In all thy works remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin." (Ecclesiasticus 7:40)