

A Note on Ash Wednesday and the Imposition of Ashes in a Time of Pandemic, By J. Neil Alexander on Jan 21, 2021. Excerpts share by Fr. Gerardo+

First, it is probably important to note that the Prayer Book rubric reads, ***If ashes are to be imposed (265)***. Although the present Prayer Book is the first to set forth a rite that includes the imposition of ashes, the practice was known in The Episcopal Church previously.

The imposition of ashes is generally understood to be rooted in the enrollment of penitents on the first day of Lent. That practice was later expanded to all of the laity as a sign of their own repentance and of their commitment to walking the way of Lent together with those who were to be baptized at Easter or, in the case of the penitents, restored to the faith.

Although that view is true enough if you are painting with a very broad brush, it does not take into account the fascinating twists and turns of the development of Ash Wednesday and the ritual practices associated with it, most notably the imposition of ashes. For example, in Rome, in the fifth century, there is clear evidence of the enrollment of penitents at the beginning of Lent, **but there is no evidence of the use of ashes in any manner**. This is particularly notable because by the time that Matthew 6 became the gospel for the first day of Lent, there is still no evidence of the use of ashes in the rite at that time.

The first recorded use of ashes is in the tenth century in Germany. In that case, **the penitents were sprinkled with ashes**, extricated from the assembly to the accompaniment of Genesis 3:19-20 (the exclusion of Adam and Eve from the garden), from which the formula for the imposition of ashes in later centuries was derived.

It was in England, in the eleventh century, that we have evidence of the sprinkling of ashes on all of the faithful, noted there in the writings of the Aelfric, the Abbot of Eynsham. By the end of that century, Pope Urban II will make the practice of sprinkling ashes on all of the faithful the practice of the western church.

What should be underscored here is that we are talking about sprinkling ashes on the heads of the faithful, not the present practice of the imposition of a cross-of-ashes on the forehead.

Although it is difficult to date precisely, **the imposition of a cross-of-ashes is first seen in monastic rites and was imposed upon the tonsure of the monks, not upon their foreheads.**

Thus, eliminating any difficulty aligning the practice with ***the Matthean exhortation not to mark-up one's face as the hypocrites do***. What we can say, however, is that even when other sources indicate that the imposition of a cross upon the forehead had become the practice not just of monks but of the whole church, **the liturgical books continued to speak of sprinkling the ashes upon the heads of the faithful.**

So, in this time of pandemic, how does this help us? Many Ash Wednesday sermons have made much of the ritual depth to be found in the parallel between the cross marked upon one's brow at holy baptism and the cross marked in ashes at the beginning of Lent. Such an approach holds in tension the promises of new life associated with baptism with a reminder of our mortality present not only in a ritual action using ashes, but in the words of the formula of imposition derived from **Genesis 3, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.**

In like manner, it is abundantly clear that the church's first ritualization of our mortality was not the imposition of ashes on the forehead, however beautifully that may resonate with chrismation at baptism, but the sprinkling of ashes upon the heads of the faithful while Genesis 3 (*remember that you are dust*) and Jonah 3 (*sackcloth and ashes*) echoed through the assembly. That action is powerfully reminiscent of the dirt that is cast upon our mortal remains at the time of our burial.

The practical considerations here are minimal. The overall shape of the rite stays in place and the ashes are blessed as usual. The difference is in their distribution: sprinkling ashes on the heads of the faithful rather than imposition in the form of a cross on the forehead.

Those participating remotely by way of some digital platform may want to prepare ashes for their personal use during the rite and to share with family and others close by. We'll have small bags with ashes for you available soon, at church's office.

Therefore, for reasons of safety and anti-viral hygiene, let us consider for this season a return to the more ancient practice of sprinkling ashes upon the heads of the people, and in our preaching and instruction helping them make the powerful connection between the ashes sprinkled upon our heads on Ash Wednesday and the dirt cast upon our mortal remains at the grave, where even in the face of its grim realities, so intensely before us in this present time, we make our song, ***Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!***