

(Readings: Joel 2:12-18; Ps. 51; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

Catholics in the Archdiocese of Detroit will experience a new — or, rather, very old — rite of penitence this year on Ash Wednesday.

Because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has asked dioceses around the world to use an alternative formula. We're used to the thumb-to-forehead method with the cross as our way of distributing ashes. The Holy See has said that due to the coronavirus, it is recommending and advising that ashes be distributed through sprinkling the ashes on top of the head instead.

And, instead of individual prayers over each person, the priest will instead pray once over the whole congregation, either "Repent, and believe in the Gospel," or "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Penitents are not allowed to self-impose ashes, even though some parishes are allowing this.

The sprinkling rite is common in Italy and other places in Europe, but it actually goes back much further than that. The Old Testament is filled with stories describing the use of ashes in such a manner. In the Book of Job, Job repented before God: "Therefore, I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:6). Daniel "turned to the Lord God, to seek help, in prayer and petition, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes" (Dn. 9:3). Jonah preached conversion and repentance to the people of Nineveh: "When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes" (Jon. 3:6). And the Maccabees army prepared for battle: "That day they fasted and wore sackcloth; they sprinkled ashes on their heads and tore their garments" (1 Mc. 3:47).

The practice continued in ancient Rome, where Christians who had grievously sinned would dress in sackcloth and cover themselves in ashes to begin their public penance on the first day of Lent. Their penance would continue until Holy Thursday, when they would be reunited with the Christian community.

By the 10th century, the beginning of the penitential season of Lent was marked by the placing of ashes on the forehead.

In modern times, the sign of the cross on the forehead on Ash Wednesday has become a very public way for Catholics to proclaim their faith to others.

We're kind of bold about our faith in that way, aren't we? People want to have that big, black cross on their heads. I don't see that as vanity, unless you are having a contest to see who can keep their cross on their foreheads the longest! Rather, it's a longing and a desire to be bold and to proclaim our faith.

More Catholics come to Mass on Ash Wednesday — which isn't a holy day of obligation — than any other day of the year besides Christmas and Easter. People are drawn to goodness, but yet we know we sin. On Ash Wednesday, we all come before one another as sinners, asking for forgiveness and repentance. This deep longing to return to the Lord, to beg the Lord for mercy, is what we're responding to.

This innate longing of Catholics to return to church on Ash Wednesday — even if they can't verbalize it — is a sign of recognition of how much God loves His children. It's also a good opportunity to re-introduce people to the sacrament of confession. It's a wonderful opportunity to represent the beauty of the sacrament of confession as a sacrament of mercy and love.

Despite the different rites this year, Ash Wednesday remains a day for Catholics to consider their relationship with God, and to invite others to do so. It's a way of reminding ourselves that the things of this world will ultimately fade away, and we should invest in and store up our treasures in heaven. Lent is a time to repent, to turn away from sin, and ashes are a symbol that the things of this world are passing away — that the only true hope we have is giving ourselves wholeheartedly to Jesus Christ.

Go onto the FORMED website for video reflections about our Lenten journey. Join us on the Fridays of Lent for Stations of the Cross at 3 PM, the Hour of Divine Mercy. Join us every Monday of Lent at 7 PM for sung Evening Prayer. These experiences will change your life... and your Lent! AMEN!