

## *Some helpful insights about Ash Wednesday during the Coronavirus*

### **What about Ash Wednesday during COVID?**

There will be a difference this year. Instead of marking each parishioner's forehead with ashes in the sign of the cross, the ashes will be sprinkled upon their heads. The practice of sprinkling ashes is both biblical and practical. This is the form that is used at the Vatican each year and in many regions in the world. Obviously, this practice will have the benefit of not touching each person, but there are also positive biblical and theological implications.

### **Biblical roots for ashes being sprinkled:**

On Ash Wednesday (February 17), Masses will be offered to begin the holy season of Lent. However, there will be a difference this year in the Archdiocese. To avoid physical contact, the ashes will be sprinkled upon our heads instead of marked in the shape of a cross. The tradition of ashes being sprinkled is not only common practice in the Vatican and other places around the world, but it is also rich in biblical imagery. Take these examples from Sacred Scriptures:

- When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly. (Esther 4:1)
- Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening, both he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads. (Joshua 7:6)
- I repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:6)
- And they threw dust on their heads and were crying out, weeping and mourning, saying, "Woe, woe, the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth, for in one hour she has been laid waste!" (Revelation 18:19)

This year as we need to avoid physical contact due to the pandemic, we can also connect more closely to the biblical roots of this tradition.

### **But they won't see that I got ashes!**

Each year on Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that our faith is more than just outward show. We hear in the Gospel: When you fast do not look like you are fasting....wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting. There is a spiritual benefit to doing good acts without being seen doing them. For this year only, we will do what we hear in the bible: "put dust on their heads" as a sign that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

### **Will ashes be sprinkled from now on?**

This year due to the pandemic we will not mark foreheads with ashes. Instead, we will sprinkle the ashes on the tops of our heads. This has a hygienic benefit, but also kept in line with the words of the Gospel: When you fast do not look like you are fasting...wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting. We acknowledge that there is a spiritual benefit to doing good acts without being seen doing them. So some have wondered if this will be a permanent change. It will not. There is a good reason behind the practice of being marked with a visible cross. As followers of Christ, we have a responsibility for being witnesses of the faith. The visible mark is one small way of being a witness. The cross of ashes declares to all who see it: "The ashes mean I'm a sinner, but the cross means I have a Savior."