



The Episcopal Diocese of Georgia

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Ash Wednesday Background and Guidance

for the Episcopal Diocese of Georgia

This year Lent begins February 17 and so will start with an Ash Wednesday under COVID-19 restrictions. What follows is some background on Ash Wednesday that informs the options offered, together with several options for how we might use ashes while mitigating risk of exposure to the virus and keep to our existing guidance.

Neither ashes nor a priest are required

On page 265 of the Book of Common Prayer, we find the rubric, “*If ashes are to be imposed*”. This was quite intentional as prior to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, there were practices in place which enjoyed a semi-official status from diocesan bishops, but the imposition of ashes was not present in the BCP. Yet, the rite has become a normative act on Ash Wednesday in our church since then, with the priest marking the sign of the cross and saying, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” becoming the iconic moment in the liturgy.

On page 269, the Prayer Book rubric states, “*In the absence of a bishop or priest, all that precedes may be led by a deacon or lay reader*” so Ash Wednesday’s imposition of ashes does not require a priest.

History on the use of ashes

I am indebted to Bishop Neil Alexander who notes that our oldest known uses of ashes in the liturgy in Germany in the tenth century and England in the eleventh century, involved sprinkling penitents with ashes. Bishop Alexander writes, “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.”

While the sign of the cross in ashes powerfully reminds us of the sign of the cross marked in oil on the foreheads of those baptized, so too can the sprinkled ashes remind us of the casting dirt on a casket or urn in the burial rite, “*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*”

So this practice of sprinkling is deeply rooted in our tradition and with teaching can speak to us anew in pandemic. This practice also keeps us in line with our ecumenical partners in the Roman Catholic Church. <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2021/01/for-ash-wednesday-vatican-asks-priests-to-sprinkle-ashes-on-heads/>

For a lengthier treatment of the rite, see J. Neil Alexander, *Celebrating Liturgical Time: Days, Weeks, and Seasons*. (New York: Church Publishing, 2014) 92-101.

Guidance - *three options:*

For outdoor liturgies (including Ashes to Go)

Ashes are blessed as usual. Prior to imposing ashes on all those present the words “*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return*” are said to the whole congregation. The person distributing the ashes may sprinkle a small amount of ash on the head as described above. Imposing the ashes with the sign of the cross is also permissible. In both cases, this is done WITHOUT saying the words above to minimize time in front of one another and to not speak directly into the faces of parishioner after parishioner.

If offering Ashes to Go, please prepare handouts available for pick up that set the context for the ashes and offer prayers that may be said as the pastoral conversations typically possible will not be able to be a part of the practice this year.

For indoor liturgies

Have small containers of ash available for use by individuals and households or pods. These may be picked up on the way into worship and held out as the blessing is pronounced in the liturgy. Prior to imposing ashes on all those present the words “*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return*” are said to the whole congregation. Parishioners may use the ashes to sprinkle on their head or to mark a sign of the cross on their own forehead or on one another in case of a household worshipping together.

With the above liturgies, it is possible to have a lay reader or clergy person masked and at least 12 feet from the imposition or sprinkling who says the words, “*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return*” for each person.

For online worship

Ashes are blessed in advance of the day and small containers of ash are prepared and made available for pick up in the days before Ash Wednesday for use by individuals and households or pods. Offer the liturgy online (using Zoom, a livestream, or prerecorded worship) and when you get to the imposition of ashes parishioners may use the ashes to sprinkle on their head or to mark a sign of the cross on their own forehead or on one another.

-The Rt. Rev. Frank S. Logue
Bishop of Georgia