As members of St. Teresa’s Parish we fulfill our baptismal commitment by being the hands and heart of Christ in our world. We achieve this commitment by accepting the human dignity of all persons, and by advocating for and serving those oppressed in our society. The community of St. Teresa’s finds its strength to fulfill this through participation in the Eucharist, prayer, learning the building of relationships, and action for Justice.
**SECOND COLLECTIONS.**

This week’s second collection benefits the St. Teresa Building & Maintenance Fund.

March 2 & 3

March 9 & 10

There will be no second collection next week.

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**ASH WEDNESDAY**

This Wednesday, March 6th, is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. With Christmas and Easter, Ash Wednesday is, perhaps, the busiest day of the year. Rectory doorbells ring from morning 'till night, announcing the presence of those who couldn’t make the Ash Wednesday service but are “stopping by” to receive ashes. Ash Wednesday liturgies attract big crowds – often larger than Sundays – and any priest foolish enough to walk the streets wearing clerical garb will inevitably be stopped by those seeking ashes “on the fly”. A case can be made that receiving ashes is the most popular devotion among Roman Catholics . . . which forces us to ask, how did this devotion and practice develop? and why is it so popular?

The most prominent example of “wearing ashes” can be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the book of Jonah we read:

> “...the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.” (Jonah 3:6)

In this passage the king’s action was a direct response to the prophet’s call to repentance. In the Old Testament, it is well established that sackcloth and ashes were linked to public repentance for sin. The early Christian tradition incorporated this practice into its liturgical life.

As early as the second century, Christians who had committed serious sin performed public penance in order to be reconciled to the Church. On Ash Wednesday, the bishop blessed hair shirts that were to be worn throughout Lent, and the penitents were sprinkled with ashes church because of their sins – just as Adam and Eve were turned out of Eden because of their disobedience – and were not readmitted to the assembly until Holy Thursday. At that time they received sacramental absolution and were welcomed once again at the Eucharistic Table.

This practice of sprinkling penitents with ashes gradually evolved into a liturgical practice whereby all of the faithful were so marked. As people were being signed, the minister would say, “Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return,” language which focuses on the finite nature of human life and the inevitability of death. Here the emphasis is that human beings are powerless over death, implying that only God can conquer death, offer us eternal life, and resurrect our bodies. Notice how this focus is significantly different from the original reason for ashes, namely, to call us to repentance and conversion.

Following the Second Vatican Council, the restored liturgy suggests different words when signing with ashes: “Repent, and believe the Gospel.” Notice that this option is more in tune with the ancient tradition of using ashes to emphasize repentance, conversion, and metanoia.

Ashes used in the Ash Wednesday liturgy are made by burning blessed palms from the Palm Sunday celebration of the previous year. These ashes are blessed with Holy Water and the distribution of ashes. Worship services are also held in Anglican, Lutheran, and some other Protestant churches.

Ash Wednesday is not a holy day of obligation, nor is the reception of ashes a sacrament. However, it is a day of fast and abstinence (as are Fridays in Lent).

Michael Kwiecien, O. Carm.