

Homily for Ash Wednesday, 2/17/2021.

The Vatican has given us guidelines on distributing Ashes during this year where we are careful about breathing on people and touching many people, one after the other.

This year I will pronounce once over everyone the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” I will do it just like I do for a blessing.

Then, as you come forward, those of us distributing the Ashes will silently take a bit of ash and sprinkle over your head.

This is not what I am used to, but I have experienced this once before. When I was trying to learn some Spanish, I was in Guadalajara, Mexico. It was in a January and February, and Lent began at that time. I was asked to help for Ash Wednesday, and in the particular parish I was in, this is how the people received ashes.

An article just came out, where the journalists did some research. Both drawing a cross with ashes on the forehead or sprinkling ashes on the top of the head are practiced throughout the world. But no experts in the liturgy that they talked to knew the history of how the two different ways developed.

There are theories, of course. One is that people sprinkled, but many of the countries that were evangelized by Irish missionaries seem to trace on the foreheads. There is also the practicality of putting ashes on the forehead if people wear veils or hats, or if it is more difficult to give ashes to someone significantly taller than oneself.

But normally one of the two methods is customary in different countries. The Church allows this kind of flexibility in distribution of the ashes.

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I share with you now a reading from a letter to the Corinthians by Saint Clement, who was Pope from the years eighty-eight (88) until ninety-nine (99). That means this writing goes all the way back to the First Century, of our faith.

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Let us fix our attention on the blood of Christ and recognize how precious it is to God his Father, since it was shed for our salvation and brought the grace of repentance to all the world.

If we review the various ages of history, we will see that in every generation the Lord has *offered the opportunity of repentance* to any who were willing to turn to him. When Noah preached God's message of repentance, all who listened to him were saved. Jonah told the Ninevites they were going to be destroyed, but when they repented, their prayers gained God's forgiveness for their sins, and they were saved, even though they were not of God's people.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the ministers of God's grace have spoken of repentance; indeed, the Master of the whole universe himself spoke of repentance with an oath: *As I live, says the Lord, I do not wish the death of the sinner but his repentance.* He added this evidence of his goodness: *House of Israel, repent of your wickedness. Tell the sons of my people: If their sins should reach from earth to heaven, if they are brighter than scarlet and blacker than sackcloth, you need only turn to me with your whole heart and say, "Father", and I will listen to you as a holy people.*

In other words, God wanted all his beloved ones to have the opportunity to repent and he confirmed this desire by his own almighty will.

That is why we should obey his sovereign and glorious will and prayerfully entreat his mercy and kindness. We should be suppliant before him and turn to his compassion, rejecting empty works and quarrelling and jealousy which only lead to death.

Brothers, we should be humble in mind, putting aside all arrogance, pride and foolish anger. Rather, we should act in accordance with the Scriptures, as the Holy Spirit says: *The wise man must not glory in his wisdom nor the strong man in his strength nor the rich man in his riches. Rather, let him who glories glory in the Lord by seeking him and doing what is right and just.* Recall especially what the Lord Jesus said when he taught gentleness and forbearance.

Be merciful, he said, so that you may have mercy shown to you. Forgive, so that you may be forgiven. As you treat others, so you will be treated. As you give, so you will receive. As you judge, so you will be judged. As you are kind to others, so you will be treated kindly. The measure of your giving will be the measure of your receiving.

Let these commandments and precepts strengthen us to live in humble obedience to his sacred words. As Scripture asks: *Whom shall I look upon with favour except the humble, peaceful man who trembles at my words?*

Sharing then in the heritage of so many vast and glorious achievements, let us hasten toward the goal of peace, set before us from the beginning. Let us keep our eyes firmly fixed on the Father and Creator of the whole universe, and hold fast to his splendid and transcendent gifts of peace and all his blessings.