

## *What Did We Do and Why?*

### *Ashes to Ashes*

I diverge again from reflections on the Rosary to revisit another *sacramental* we used this past week, ashes on Ash Wednesday. You will recall from last week's reflection on the *sacramental* of our *Blessing of the Throats* on the Feast of St. Blaise that a *sacramental* of the Church is the use of any blessed material object or action that represents or reminds us of God's presence and action in our lives, and expresses our response to God. Our Catholic use of *sacramentals* is abundant. Some common examples of rituals that are *sacramentals* are making the sign of the cross, bowing, folded hands, genuflection, the recital of blessings, the washing of feet, the celebration of the seasons of the liturgical year. Statues and icons are examples of objects that are *sacramentals*, as are blessed candles, the nativity scene, the Advent wreath, crucifixes, holy oil, holy water, incense, liturgical vessels (e.g. chalices), a Mary garden, medals, palm branches, graves, funeral palls, religious habits, scapulars, rosaries, vestments, wedding rings, and just the other day - the imposition of blessed ashes, with the ashes themselves also being a *sacramental*. The practice of having ourselves signed with ashes has its roots in ancient times and the Old Testament when ashes were thrown over one's head to signify mourning and sadness for one's sins, and repentance of them before God. They are also a reminder of our human mortality, and the reality that one day we will all return to the earth from which we came. The early Church used ashes in these ways, and at one time the priest sprinkled ashes on the heads of those coming to the Sacrament of Penance. By the time of the eighth century those who were about to die were laid on the ground on top of sackcloth sprinkled with ashes. The priest would bless the dying person with holy water, saying, "Remember that thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return." After the sprinkling, the priest asked, "Art thou content with sackcloth and ashes in testimony of thy penance before the Lord in the day of judgment?" To which the dying person replied, "I am content." In all of these examples, the symbolism of mourning, mortality and penance is evident. Eventually, the use of ashes was adapted to mark the beginning of Lent, the 40-day preparation period for Easter, the great celebration of our dying and rising to new life in Christ. In our present liturgy for Ash Wednesday, we use ashes made from the burned palm branches distributed on the Palm Sunday of the previous year. As the blessed ashes are placed on the people's foreheads the minister makes the sign of the cross and says, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return," or "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." As we begin this season of Lent in preparation for Easter we remember the significance of the ashes we have received: We mourn and do penance for our sins. We again convert our hearts to the Lord and renew the promises made at our baptism when we died to the old life, and rose to new life with Christ.

Please let us know what else about our faith tradition you'd like to find out more about.

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