

Why are ashes being distributed “differently” during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

The purpose of the “different” manner of distributing ashes this year is to ensure the health and safety of all who wish to receive them on Ash Wednesday. The measures being taken are similar to the precautions currently in place for the reception of Holy Communion and the conferral of the Sacraments of Confirmation and the Anointing of the Sick. Ultimately, they are meant to limit contact and the potential exchange of droplets/aerosols.

Since blessed ashes are typically traced in the form of a cross on the foreheads of those who receive them in the United States, the manner in which they will be distributed this year may seem “different” to some. However, in many parts of the world, including Italy, blessed ashes are typically sprinkled on the heads of those who receive them. In fact, this is how our Holy Father, Pope Francis, receives his ashes! The *Roman Missal* instruction for the distribution of ashes actually says: “The Priest places ashes on the head of all those present.” Moreover, in the first reading proclaimed at Mass the Lord says, “Return to me with your whole *heart*...Rend your *hearts*, not your garments and return” (Joel 2: 12-13). Therefore, a “different” reception of ashes for some is an occasion for all to begin and maintain Lent as a season not of outward appearances, but of renewal in matters of the heart – faith, hope, and love – through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving done before the Father who sees in secret and repays (Matt 6:1-6, 16-18).

How are the Ashes to be distributed during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Step one: the Priest blesses the ashes after the Homily and sprinkles them with holy water in the usual manner (*Roman Missal*).

Step two: the Priest says the formula for the distribution of ashes only once, applying it to all in general: “Repent and believe in the Gospel” or “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Step three: the Priest and those assisting with the distribution of ashes sanitize their hands and put on a face mask (and shield if preferred).

Step four: the faithful come forward as they do for the reception of Holy Communion to receive ashes. They bow their heads while the minister sprinkles ashes on them. Then they return to their places. Note: this is done without saying anything; the proper antiphon or another appropriate chant is sung.

Step five: the Priest and those who have assisted with the distribution of ashes wash and sanitize their hands. The Universal Prayer is said and Mass continues in the usual way.

