

## Good-Bye, Alleluia! Hello, Ash Wednesday!

There is much hoopla these days in our streets with the celebration of Mardi Gras, trying to get as much partying in before Lent starts. In the Church we get in all the Alleluias we can on this last Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord, on this Sunday of His Transfiguration. It will be quieter once Ash Wednesday comes around. So before it does, we say good-bye to the "Alleluia," the festive word we use to celebrate our Lord's work and victory on our behalf. For the next six weeks, we will bury the "Alleluia" to help us prepare for Good Friday and Easter. It is the fast before the feast.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of Lent, a time of penitence, prayer and preparation. Ash Wednesday became the day for Christians consciously and publicly to begin that period of penitence. Lent became the period of spiritual and physical preparation for Easter. During Lent, catechumens were prepared for reception into the Church through Baptism and for confirmation at Easter Vigil. Many of those early catechumens were marked with a cross of ashes on their foreheads. By the 9th century, the imposition of ashes was used for all members of the Church.

By why ashes? The use of ashes is deeply rooted in the Bible, as these references indicate.

- **Genesis 3:19** states that God created us from dust and to dust we shall return (see also Psalm 90:3; 104:29; Ecclesiastes 3:20);
- **Esther 4:1**: Jewish Mordecai put on sackcloth and ashes to mourn and wail when a decree was sent out to kill all the Jews;
- **Daniel 9:3**: Prophet Daniel put on sackcloth and ashes as he prayed to God and confessed his sins;
- **Jonah 3:6**: Ninevah's king put on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of hearing God's Word and then repenting of sin;
- **Matthew 23:37**: When Jesus said, "Woe to you" to the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida, He spoke of repentance that involved sackcloth and ashes.

Come Ash Wednesday this year, many Christians will have a cross of ashes on their foreheads, much like the cross traced on them at their Baptism. Such a cross of ashes publicly proclaims from where they have come (God their Creator), to where they are going; and by whose power they live each day.