**Newsletter – Spring 2017**

**Ash Wednesday Assignments**. If you are assigned to Mass on Ash Wednesday, March 1, you will be distributing both ashes and Holy Communion. The Masses are at 6:45, 9, Noon and 7 p.m. All Masses will be in the main church. Ministers will distribute ashes after the homily. The ashes will be in small bowls near the altar or in the center aisle near the altar. The presider will put ashes on your forehead before you begin to serve the assembly. Dip your thumb into the ashes and make the Sign of the Cross on the forehead of the person who comes to you. While doing this say either of the following:

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.”

The first person to finish should help the presider if he has not finished and then give ashes to the musicians. When done, return bowls to the table, go the sacristy and clean your hands.

**Easter Sunday**. We will offer the Body of Christ only.

**Dress Code Reminder**. For men coats and ties. For women dresses, suits or dress slacks.

**Recruiting Eucharistic Ministers**. Spring is the time we invite parishioners to consider joining the Eucharistic Ministry. If you know someone who is interested in our ministry, or who might be if you suggested it to them, let me know their name. I will take it from there. We could use some men. Currently we are 69 percent women.

**Confirmation**. There will be no Mass associated with Confirmation May 17. I had previously indicated there would be a Mass.

**The 1CL Station**. If you are assigned to this station, and you are done serving the cup to people from the front pews, please do not stay at the station waiting for the choir to go to receive Holy Communion. That looks awkward. Our procedures call for you to shift with the priest to Station No. 3 serving the side pews. If that is crowded find another place to go and help out.

**Ashes. Why?**

In my role as coordinator of the Eucharistic Ministry I have long noted that some of the largest crowds we get in church appear on Ash Wednesday even though is not a holy day of obligation. They are there to get ashes put on their foreheads and hear the admonition that they are dust and to dust they will return.

Why would anyone want his or her appearance marred by black ashes? Perhaps it is something ancient ingrained in the human psyche, a sense of guilt or weakness to be acknowledged and which seeks forgiveness.

About 750 BC the prophet Jonah railed against the wickedness of the great city of Nineveh and predicted that because of God’s unhappiness it would be overthrown. The king got the message, ordered the citizens to repent and then sat himself in ashes.

Isaiah writes about resort to ashes as a common practice to please God. The prophet Daniel turns to the Lord with prayer, fasting and ashes. The book of Judith describes Israelites prostrate before the temple with ashes strewn on their heads. The Maccabee rebels put ashes on their heads before battle. Jesus refers to ashes as a sign of repentance.

Little wonder, then, that Christianity adopted the symbol. In the 4th century penitents – serious sinners doing rigorous penance – were sprinkled with ashes. The first identifiable Ash Wednesday occurred about 960. By the 11th century Abbot Aelfric in England noted that it was customary for the faithful to take part in a Wednesday ceremony before Lent that included the imposition of ashes. Urban II (pope 1088-1099) called for the general use of ashes on the Wednesday before Lent. Soon after we got the name Ash Wednesday.

There were strong parallels between people preparing for baptism (called catechumens) and the penitents. There was, in fact, an Order of Penitents. Ashes were a sign of admission into the order, in the context of which you worked out your penance. Penitents wore special garments and were assigned a special place in the church. Like the catechumens they were dismissed from the Sunday assembly after the Liturgy of the Word. In fact the penitential process was modeled on the conversion journey of the catechumens. The church viewed falling into serious sin after Baptism an indication that there had not really been a conversion. So penance was a second attempt to foster conversion.

In those days Lent was marked by community prayer and fasting for the catechumens preparing for baptism, which would occur at Easter. The Order of Penitents became focused on Lent too, with reconciliation often celebrated on Holy Thursday so the newly reconciled could share in the liturgies of the Triduum. Lent was clearly focused on Baptism, both for catechumens and penitents.

As the years evolved the catechumenate disappeared and along with it Lent’s clear emphasis on baptism. Emphasis shifted to the passion and death of Christ. Medieval art reflected the new focus. So did popular piety. Lent came to be seen as a time to acknowledge guilt for sins that led to Christ’s passion. Repentance was seen as a way to avoid punishment more than a way to renew baptismal commitment.

The Order of Penitents also faded away. But ashes did not. They became associated with personal penance and the Lenten connection to Baptism was no longer obvious to most people. The admonition to “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return” focused on mortality and was an incentive to repent. There was little association with the positive message in Baptism to model your life on what Jesus preached.

This is the way things were until the mid-1960s when the Second Vatican Council called for a renewal of Lent to recover its old baptismal character. The recovery was significantly advanced by the restoration of the catechumenate process mandated by the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) in 1972. A second formula for the imposition of ashes was introduced that recalls baptismal promises to reject sin and accept the gospel message – “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel.” This is a clear call to conversion, to move away from sin and toward Christ.

In my personal experience the renewed connection between Lent and baptism is slowly making itself aware in the church. If you attend the Easter Vigil rites and Mass it is abundantly clear as the new people coming into the church are baptized. It is a wonderful evening. Everyone is welcome.

Jim McCulla

**A Prayer for Ash Wednesday**

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, the all-holy one, who gives us life and all things. As we go about our lives, the press of our duties and activities often leads us to forget your presence and your love. We fall into sin and fail to live out the responsibilities that you have entrusted to those who were baptized into your Son.

In this holy season, help us to turn our minds and hearts back to you. Lead us into sincere repentance and renew our lives with your grace. Help us to remember that we are sinners, but even more, help us to remember your loving mercy.

As we live through this Ash Wednesday, may the crosses of ashes that mark our foreheads be a reminder to us and to those we meet that we belong to your Son. May our worship and prayer and penitence this day be sustained throughout these 40 days of Lent. Bring us refreshed and renewed to the celebration of Christ’s resurrection at Easter.

We ask this through your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen