

Why Ashes?

Why ashes?

Why indeed ...?

As a catechist, I've taught children about receiving ashes.

As a minister, I've placed ashes on people's foreheads.

And – thanks to a good friend of mine in Kansas City – I've recently had the opportunity – as an apologist – to **EXPLAIN** the practice to someone who had expressed a bit of skepticism about it.

It all started with an e-mail I exchanged with my friend, David. I was best man at his wedding and godfather to his first son. David's a Lutheran. Well, we can't all be perfect, but he **DID** marry a Catholic girl!

I told him that I would be preaching on Ash Wednesday and – quite out of the blue – David asked me if it would be **OK** if he went to a Catholic Church to receive ashes on his forehead.

What an opportunity for some faith sharing!

But – wait – there's more ...

The trouble all started when David opened the discussion up to another of his Christian friends ... this one an evangelical who I'll call "Jack."

Jack expressed his **CONCERN** about this **CATHOLIC** practice.

I mean, was it Biblical? Or just some harmless if misguided practice? Or was it something ... **ELSE?**

Enter Deacon Bob, certified professional catechist, apologist and defender of the faith ...

Jack didn't even see it coming!

Some of you may know that Deacon Chip Jones and I have been teaching a series of classes which we have grouped under the title “Why do Catholics ... ?” which was shorted from the name we really **WANTED** to use “Why do **YOU** Catholics ... ?”

Not one to be shy about defending my faith, I gave Jack, not one ... not two ... but a whole series of Biblical references concerning ashes and marking the foreheads of the faithful. I gave him something like 15-20 quotations from the Bible ... and I'm sure there are probably plenty more.

Let me share just a few of those with you.

Why do Catholics have their foreheads marked with a cross?

Because in the Bible a mark on the forehead is a symbol of a person's ownership. Roman soldiers, for example, would have the mark of Caesar

BRANDED on their foreheads. By having our foreheads marked with a cross, we symbolize that **WE** belong to Jesus Christ, who died on a Cross.

This is in imitation of the spiritual mark – or seal – that is put on us in baptism, when Jesus delivered us from slavery to sin and the devil. (Rom. 6:3-18).

It is also in imitation of the way the righteous are described in the book of Revelation, where we read of the servants of God:

"Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads." (Revelation 7:3)

"[The demons locusts] were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads" (Revelation 9:4)

"Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads." (Revelation 14:1)

This is in contrast – of course – to the followers of the beast, who have the number “666” on their foreheads or hands.

There is a parallel to this in the Jewish scriptures – the Old Testament – in the book of Ezekiel.

The early Church Fathers seized on this connection and expounded on it in their homilies, seeing in Ezekiel a prophetic foreshadowing of the sealing of Christians as servants of Christ. It is also part of the background to the Catholic practice of making the sign of the cross, which in the early centuries (as can be documented from the second century on) was practiced by using one's thumb to furrow one's brow with a small sign of the cross, like we Catholics do today at the reading of the Gospel during Mass.

But why is the signing done with ashes?

Because ashes are a biblical symbol of mourning and penance. In Bible times the custom was to fast, wear sackcloth, sit in dust and ashes, and put dust and ashes on one's head.

While we no longer normally wear sackcloth or sit in dust and ashes – thank goodness! – the customs of fasting and putting ashes on one's forehead as a sign of mourning and penance have survived to this day.

What are some biblical examples of people putting dust and ashes on their foreheads?

Consider the following verses:

"That same day a Benjamite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh, his clothes torn and dust on his head." (1 Samuel 4:12)

"On the third day a man arrived from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and with dust on his head. When he came to David, he fell to the ground to pay him honor." (2 Samuel 1:20)

"Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornamented robe she was wearing. She put her hand on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went." (2 Samuel 13:19)

"When David arrived at the summit, where people used to worship God, Hushai the Arkite was there to meet him, his robe torn and dust on his head." (2 Samuel 15:32)

Is there any other significance to the ashes?

Yes! They also symbolize death and so remind us of our mortality. Thus when the minister uses his thumb to sign one of the faithful with the ashes, he says, "Remember, you are dust and unto dust you shall return," which is modeled after God's address to Adam (Genesis 3:19; cf. Job 34:15, Psalms 90:3, 104:29, Ecclesiastes 3:20). This also echoes the words at a burial, "Ashes to ashes; dust to dust," which is based on God's words to Adam in Genesis 3 and Abraham's confession, "I am nothing but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). It is thus a reminder of our mortality and our need to repent before this life is over and we face our judgement.

Where do the ashes used on Ash Wednesday come from?

They are made by burning palm fronds which have been saved from the previous year's Palm Sunday, they are then blessed by a priest. Blessed ashes having been used in God's rituals since the time of Moses (Numbers 19:9-10, 17).

Why are ashes from the previous year's Palm Sunday used?

Because Palm Sunday was when the people rejoiced at Jesus' triumphal entrance to Jerusalem. They celebrated his arrival by waving palm fronds, little realizing that he was coming to die for their sins. By using palms from Palm Sunday, it is a reminder that we must not only rejoice of Jesus' coming but also regret the fact that our sins made it necessary for him to die for us in order to save us from hell.

Strangely, I never heard back from Jack after addressing his concerns.

But ... that's **WHY** we Catholics come to services like this on Ash Wednesday to have ashes placed on our foreheads.

And, Brother Jack, if you're still listening – **YES YOU CAN** – receive ashes on your forehead.

To paraphrase that old orange juice commercial ... it's not just for Catholics any more.

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