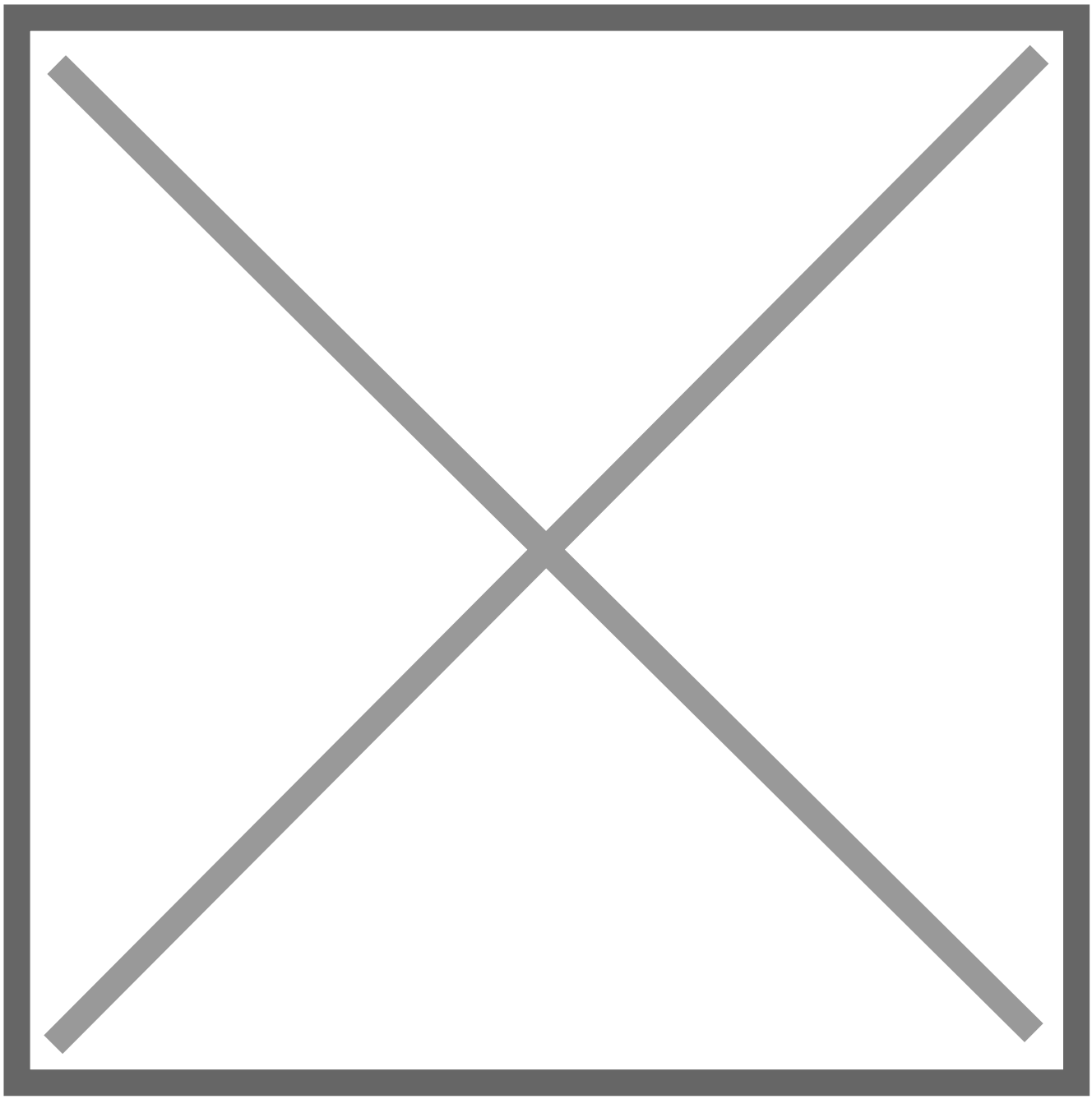
News



A boy looks up after receiving ashes and says, "Amen," to the Eucharistic minister during Ash Wednesday Mass at Sacred Heart Church in Prescott, Ariz., March 5, 2025. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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It's a common experience for Ash Wednesday Massgoers: The pews are packed with many attendees, many of whom are unfamiliar to regular parishioners.

Who are all these people, and why are they there?

They want their ashes.

Tracking Mass attendance from 2019 to 2024, Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate — which conducts social scientific studies for and about the Catholic Church — reported Ash Wednesday continues to compete with both Easter and Christmas for the highest attended Masses each year.

In fact, Ash Wednesday 2024 Mass attendance actually topped Christmas 2023 Mass attendance.

Why do so many people make an extra effort to get to church on Ash Wednesday — the first of Lent's 40 days — when it is not a holy day of obligation, and they are not

required to receive ashes?

"One of the things certainly is, for many people, it is a very clear identity marker that they're Roman Catholic," said Jesuit Fr. Bruce Morrill, theology professor and the chair of Roman Catholic Studies at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.

"I've often picked up on younger people — even in before this era of more conservative younger Catholic people — being very excited about it, like, 'This is our public statement that we're Catholic,'" he said.

But, he noted, other Christian denominations distribute ashes as well — so the sooty forehead smudge you see on Ash Wednesday may belong to an Episcopalian or a Lutheran.

But for everyone, ashes include an invitation to ponder mortality and sin.

"The two things — death and sin — I think overlap very strongly," Morrill said.

While people may rush to get their ashes — with their unmistakable outward sign of interior penance — Morrill has not noticed a similar stampede to the confessional.

Yet "even in an era where people are not going to the sacrament of penance at the rate that was once the case in the earlier 20th century, there's something profoundly touched by this symbol about our sin," he said. "It's a symbolic ritual action that speaks to them."

Mixed with the heaviness of contemplating the Four Last Things — death, judgement, heaven and hell — is an anticipatory glance toward a change of season, and with it, renewal.

"Ash Wednesday is a way of looking ahead to Easter," Morrill said. "And here in the Northern Hemisphere, that also means looking ahead to spring."

Ashes are made from the palms blessed on Palm Sunday of the previous year, and the tradition of placing them on penitents dates to the 11th century.

As noted in the Directory on Popular Piety and Liturgy, which is published by the Vatican's Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "The use of ashes is a survival from an ancient rite according to which converted sinners submitted themselves to canonical penance. The act of putting on ashes symbolizes

fragility and mortality, and the need to be redeemed by the mercy of God."

But it is not, the directory continues, a gesture to be taken lightly.

"Far from being a merely external act, the Church has retained the use of ashes to symbolize that attitude of internal penance to which all the baptized are called during Lent," it states. "The faithful who come to receive ashes should be assisted in perceiving the implicit internal significance of this act, which disposes them toward conversion and renewed Easter commitment."

Speaker, retreat leader and author Liz Kelly also emphasized the connection between ritual and relationship.

"Embedded in the human heart is a deep desire for relationship with God, a recognition that disciplines like Ash Wednesday, nurture and protect," said Kelly, who leads women's formation at the Word on Fire Institute and who in March expects to publish her next book, "Anchored by Hope: Meditations to Calm the Anxious Soul" with The Word Among Us Press.

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"We are created for order, and whether our lives are well ordered or disordered, we all still suffer from some disorder and we crave the order that is instilled in us from Divine Order," she said. "Ash Wednesday responds to this deep desire for order, to re-ordering, an order that leads to new life, flourishing and peace."

In Kelly's Minnesota parish, ashes are sprinkled on the top of the head, not imposed on the forehead — providing a somewhat different penitential experience.

"The ash trickles down into your hair — itchy, dirty, irritating, spreading and sullying everything it touches. You kind of forget that it's there until it's time to brush your hair or go to bed, or you reach up to scratch your head, and then, there it is: This irritating, black smudge," she said.

"Ash has a corrosive texture too; it isn't easily removed just by your hands or rubbing it," she added. "You need water to really remove it."

That provides an occasion for additional reflection, she said.

"And isn't that just like sin? We need mediation to remove it," she said. "Don't we desire exactly what reconciliation effects, to be washed of this irritating, corrosive smudge?"

She continued: "This is a part of the Church's great genius: She understands that we need sacramentals, we need to wear these things in and on the body as a means of effecting interior transformation and understanding."

Timothy O'Malley, who teaches at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, agreed.

"Religious practice requires the body, and it's only a kind of really trite spirituality that forgets that, and tries to think about it simply as a kind of intellectual phenomenon," said O'Malley, a theology professor, academic director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy and associate director for research at the McGrath Institute for Church Life at Notre Dame.

O'Malley added that the sprinkling of ashes on the head is prevalent worldwide, even if infrequent in the United States.

Ashes' materiality seems to appeal to people, and self-discipline is a natural attraction in a society focused on self-improvement, especially when paired with a realistic awareness that life has both proverbial highs and lows.

"I think people just need those periods of time in their lives," O'Malley said. "There's a recognition that existence can't be entirely festive. Fasting is needed, and this is a sort of doorway to the fasting of the Church."

That realization, he explained, can be intriguing across denominations — or for those with no particular denomination at all. He noted that he has a friend who lives in New Orleans, who, despite not attending Mass, regularly gives up alcohol for Lent because of the city's Catholic culture.

And while it is to be hoped that would-be penitents actually find their way inside the walls of a church this Feb. 18, O'Malley noted that on street corners in New York City, ashes are often passed out as people exit the subway.

"I've always thought to myself, there's a desire for the human being, for a certain space of silence and contemplation — the sort of day of penance," he said. "It's fascinating."