

ASH WEDNESDAY



The spirit of penance we must have when receiving the ashes and in which we must live all during Lent

16.1 First Point

The purpose of the Church in putting ashes on your head today is to make you realize that today you ought to be filled with the true spirit of penance. This sacred ceremony is a remnant of the Church's ancient discipline, which obliged public penitents at the start of their penance to receive ashes on their heads at the hands of the ministers of the holy altar, in full view of the faithful.

You ought to resolve to unite with this institution of the Church, to participate in it, and to begin on this holy day to prepare by a suitable disposition of heart for this holy practice, the soul of which is sincere compunction. This is how we ought to begin and to end this holy season of forty days.

16.2 Second Point

In receiving the ashes, ask God that this spirit of penance may inspire you, accompany your fasting, and sanctify it. External fasting is of little value; it must also humble your spirit while mortifying your flesh.

The effect that the reception of the ashes ought to produce in you is to make penance a part of all your behavior and to make you fast with your eyes, your tongue, and your heart: your eyes, by great recollection and a turning aside from whatever might distract you; your tongue, by exact silence, which will cut you off from creatures in order to be attached only to God during this holy season; your heart, by renouncing entirely all thoughts that might distract you, draw you away, and interrupt your communication with God.

The results of Christian fasting are mortification of the senses and of selfish inclinations and detachment from creatures.

16.3 Third Point

To encourage us to the spirit of fasting while depriving ourselves of sense pleasures and detaching us from all the satisfactions we might find in the use of creatures, the Church, by the voice of the priest who imposes the ashes on us, tells us to remember that being human, we are only ashes and will return to ashes.¹

Nothing more strongly incites us to detachment from created things and to sincere penance than the thought of death. This is why the Church wants us to think about this truth during all the time we spend in the penitential exercises of Lent. She hopes that through this holy thought, we may be encouraged to practice penance with more affection and fervor.

We will die, and we will die only once. We will die well and with God only insofar as we have lived in the practice of penance and have deprived ourselves of the pleasures that the sensual seek in the use of creatures. Do we wish to die a holy death? Let us live as true penitents.

1. Gn 3:19

