

Dear Columbians,

It is good and certainly very pleasing to God that you have come to start the holy season of Lent by receiving ashes.

What do ashes symbolize? They indicate three things.

### **“Remember you are dust”**

First, they are a sign of our mortality.

One of the instructions that can be said when we receive ashes is, “Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). This recalls human person’s beginning, his creation, from the dust of the earth, when “God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; thus, he became a living being” (Gen 2:7). The human person is, in other words, more than dust, but also has a soul breathed into him by God. Lent is a privileged occasion for us to ask ourselves and ask God directly how our soul is doing, how we have been responding to the gift of life God has given us.

But ashes also are a clear reminder to us of the fact that each of us will die and our bodies will for a time return to the dust from which we came. Lent is the time for us to ask if we would be truly ready to meet the Lord. Just like at the beginning of creation, we recognize that we need to be infused with the breath of life, with God’s life. Yes, we will die, but God wants to raise us, even now. Lent is not just about a minor course correction in our life but about a death and resurrection, as we enter into Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection for us.

### **“Repent and believe in the Gospel”**

Second, ashes are a sign of repentance.

The second instruction that can be given to us as ashes are imposed is “Repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15). These were the words Jesus preached at the beginning of his public ministry and that he says to each of us when we come to receive ashes. Lent is the time when all of us recall our need to turn away from sin and to deepen our faith and practice of it. Ashes are a sign of that need for conversion. We see them used this way throughout Sacred Scripture, particularly by the prophet Jonah with the Ninevites, by the suffering Job, by the prophet Daniel, by the heroic Maccabees.

### **Humble Supplication**

Third, ashes are a means of prayerful supplication for salvation, as we see in the Book of Esther. Jesus cites them in this way in his words to Chorazin and Bethsaida, how if the works he had done there had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have repented in sackcloth and ashes. They are a sign that we need a Savior.

So today as you bear these ashes on your forehead, you are humbly remembering your mortality and need for God to breathe his life into you; you are showing your desire for a fresh start, for a new life, turning away from things that keep you from God, and turning to God, so that you may turn more and more with God; and you are giving witness that you know you need a Savior and the salvation he brings.

### **Continuing the Good Start**

While ashes are a very significant sign that we’re getting Lent off to a good start, however, Lent is meant to be a 40-day journey with Jesus into the “desert,” apart from many of our normal distractions that can impede our relationship with God. The Catholic Church, basing herself on Jesus’ words that are proclaimed every Ash Wednesday at Mass, always proposes three ways that we solidify what the ashes signify, so that we turn away from sin, grow faithfully in divine life, and become more like the Savior to whom we turn.

### **Prayer**

The first way is prayer. Jesus says, “When you pray...” When we pray, we turn our attention to God and turn away from what keeps us from God. We listen to the Good News he whispers to us. We receive his strength to turn away from the temptations we encounter and embrace ever more the life to which he calls us.

### **Fasting**

The second way is fasting. Jesus says, “When you fast...” Fasting, as Catholics do today today by norm and are called to do in a determined way throughout Lent, helps us to recall that our body of dust and its desires are not the most important thing. “Man does not live on bread alone,” Jesus says, “but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). Sometimes we can live a life in which we just try to satisfy our hungers and desires, to go from one pleasure to another. Fasting allows us to subordinate our bodily desires and needs to those of our soul. It allows us to control

our desires rather than let them control us. The more we learn to say no to our desires, the easier it is to say yes to God and to more important things.

### **Almsgiving**

The third is to give alms. Jesus says, “When you give alms...” Very often the sins we commit flow from selfishness or egocentrism, putting ourselves first. That is why the Lord commands us to give alms, which requires us to look toward others’ needs and not just our own, to love others in deeds and not just wish them well, to take responsibility for their welfare, for Christ says that as often as we fail to do something for them, we fail to do it to him (Mt 25:31ff). If we are conscious that one day our body will return to dust and that we can take none of our money and possession into the next life — only our deeds of love — we will start to store up a treasure for ourselves in heaven, where God will reward us.

And so we’d urge you today as Lent begins to take advantage of the graces of the season to try to unite yourself to Jesus in his prayer, fasting and giving of himself as alms. Prayer reorders our relationship with God, almsgiving with others, and fasting within ourselves. When done well, each is a means to grow in holiness and self-mastery.

### **Living Lent with Others**

If you would like some help in living Lent well, please know that you are most welcome to join Columbia Catholic Ministry! Every day we come together to pray with adoration and Mass. We regularly get together to go care for

the poor. We seek to grow in faith together through Bible studies, lectures, small group discussions. We even fast together, as we’re doing today, before we come together for simple soup tonight at the new Catholic Center (the Thomas Merton Institute for Catholic Life, 405 W. 114th Street) at 6:30 pm, to which you’re welcome. If you’d like to find out more, please visit our website at [Columbia-catholic.org](http://Columbia-catholic.org) where you can sign up for our newsletter to be invited to everything we do, or follow us on Instagram.

Please know of our prayers for a holy Lent and please pray for us, too!

### **Columbia Campus Ministry**

Thomas Merton Institute for Catholic Life  
405 W. 114th Street, New York, NY 10025  
(located behind Notre Dame Church)

Sunday Mass	5:00 pm, Notre Dame
Daily Mass	12:10 pm, Notre Dame
Confessions	Mon-Fri 11:10-12:00 Sun 4:15-4:44 Notre Dame
Stations	Fri 11:00 am, ND
Adoration	Mon-Thur, 11 am ND
Catholic Night	Wed, 6:30-8:30 pm Notre Dame
Chaplain	Fr. Roger Landry <a href="mailto:catholicpriest@columbia.edu">catholicpriest@columbia.edu</a>

[Columbia-Catholic.org](http://Columbia-Catholic.org)



# **The Meaning of Ashes and the Lenten Call to Conversion**