



Rt Rev. Joseph Toal STB KC*HS Bishop of Motherwell

SOME THOUGHTS ON ASH WEDNESDAY

On Ash Wednesday we begin the Season of Lent, a time of conversion and spiritual renewal.

Ash Wednesday, and Good Friday for that matter, are not Holydays of Obligation. The faithful are not obliged to attend Mass on Ash Wednesday and we do not celebrate Mass on Good Friday.

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of Fasting and Abstinence and Catholics over the age of 14 are obliged to keep these days in accordance with the Church's laws on Fasting and Abstinence.

On Ash Wednesday ashes are blessed and the foreheads of the faithful are marked with these ashes. The faithful seek this marking with ashes as a sign of repentance for sin, and a desire to live the Gospel with stronger devotion and commitment, while acknowledging our mortality and the realisation that we will give an account of ourselves to God when life on this earth ends.

On Ash Wednesday the faithful are exhorted to take up the traditional Lenten disciplines of Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving, and to persevere in keeping them through the 40 days of Lent. The proclamation of the Word of God in the Readings provided for Mass on Ash Wednesday is a vital part of the Church's instruction on this day and indeed the Lord's own expectation on Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving.

The Faithful most commonly receive the ashes during Mass, and many Catholics will make great efforts to attend Mass on this special day. When it is not possible to attend Mass the blessed ashes may be placed on the foreheads of the faithful in a service in which the Word of God is proclaimed and prayers are said communally. Members of the lay faithful can be deputed to conduct such services by their Parish Priest but must be properly instructed in what they are to do. Any sense that this is some sort of magical rite divorced from the commitment to the faith expected of Catholics must be avoided.

Since there is a strong penitential aspect to Ash Wednesday it should be a day on which the faithful are exhorted to renew their sorrow for sin and resolve to confess their sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Lent. Only then, after making their confession, should those who have absented themselves from attending Sunday Mass receive the Holy Eucharist. It rather defeats the purpose of Ash Wednesday if people presume they can receive Holy Communion without first of all going to confession to confirm their desire to practice their faith in the manner the Church asks of us all.

In the Church in Scotland we are encouraged to support the Church's International Aid Fund (SCIAF) as part of our Lenten Almsgiving. The faithful are exhorted therefore to pick up a "Wee Box" on Ash Wednesday and fill it up through Lent.

I wish everyone a blessed Ash Wednesday and a spiritually fruitful Lent.

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