Ashes to Alleluia

On Ash Wednesday the procession to the altar is as diverse as we will ever see it! Mothers carrying babies, toddlers holding onto dad's hand, teens, parishioners, neighbors, employees from nearby places of business, the elderly supported by walkers; we all come together to mark the beginning of Lent. We receive the ashes on our foreheads. We "remember that we are dust and unto dust we shall return."

The act of receiving ashes is not a sacrament. Actually, ashes are what we call a "sacramental."

> Sacramentals are dynamic signs which help us prepare for receiving the sacraments. They help us receive the graces of the sacraments and they help make holy various occasions in our lives. They also remind us that all of creation has the potential to reveal God's presence and blessing. (*Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, HarperCollins, 1995)

In receiving the ashes, we are saying that we are entering into the time of Lent, preparing for Easter with prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We are embracing Jesus' journey: the cross of suffering and the promise of the Resurrection. The ashes help us connect the spiritual aspect of Christ's cross and resurrection with our everyday lives. In addition to the liturgical significance of receiving ashes, we also are called to remember that in our repentance is a call to proper relationship between God and ourselves and between others and ourselves.

From our Jewish roots we learned the importance of caring for the poor. From what Jesus says and does in the Scriptures we learn the Christian call to have a preference for the poor. We teach our children the importance of giving alms and sharing resources, and we teach them how to choose who will receive the resources that we share.

Jesus also teaches us about the importance of prayer. Jesus prays 17 times in the Gospels; he models prayer for us today. In the Scriptures, Jesus prays often, morning and night. He prays during critical events in his life and before ministering to people in need.

All of this is relevant to how we should approach Lent, which ultimately calls us to follow in the footsteps of Christ. And the ashes mark the beginning of our walk.

Download our Lent guide, including a craft and Stations of the Cross, here!