

West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod  
Office of the Bishop  
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**Observing Ash Wednesday 2021**

The question has been raised, “What shall we do about Ash Wednesday?”

How this question gets answered in any particular place should take account of local factors, but there are also some overarching principles that take precedence. In other words, liturgical liberty, if not bounded by reasonable parameters, can quickly become liturgical license, and that which one congregation does, in this age of communication and cross-congregation relationships, affects other congregations. The Lutheran doctrine on adiaphora (FC SD X), providing a salutary clarification on the interpretation and application of the *satis est* principle (CA VII), recommends neither liturgical anarchy nor self-indulgent idiosyncratic practice.

No adiaphoron shall save us. Nor will it damn us. An adiaphoron, however, may have greater or lesser utility in the promulgation of the Gospel and in the cultivation of piety. Furthermore, an adiaphoron may be made a matter of rule, *i.e.*, something to be done or not or something otherwise regulated. In other words, something may be an adiaphoron and I am still under obligation to do it (or not) according to the rules set by the ecclesiastical authorities because, as the *Formula of Concord* states,

Therefore, we believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, to reduce, or expand such practices according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church.(FC SD X:9, Kolb-Wengert)

It is in light of this, our common confession, that I offer these thoughts that they might help us all engage the challenges posed by a pandemical Ash Wednesday with an idea of managing our adiaphora in an “orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church.”

**Ash Wednesday is an adiaphoron**

While Ash Wednesday is a long-beloved observance of the Lutheran church, it is not an essential of the faith. Whether it is observed or not does not affect our salvation. The Word that is preached on Ash Wednesday, however, is not an adiaphoron, but there is no requirement that that Word be limited to Ash Wednesday, just as there is no requirement that the preaching of the Word regarding the death and resurrection of Our Lord be limited to the *Triduum*.

While an adiaphoron, we have found it to be a useful adiaphoron. It has provided an occasion for the preaching of the Word. More importantly, it has provided an occasion for preaching specific aspects of the Word that might otherwise be ignored. It has also been an aid in the cultivation of piety, especially as it invites us in Lenten discipline.

There are good reasons to observe Ash Wednesday, but those reasons should be balanced against other factors which may militate against observance or, at least, observance as we have experienced heretofore.

We sometimes forget that there have been congregations that have not observed Ash Wednesday for lack of clergy or simply because it was never their local tradition. This year, some congregations will opt not to observe because of challenges posed by the pandemic. Still others will modify their observance to be on-line, just as they have done with regular Sunday worship.

### **Ashes are adiaphora**

For many of us who qualify for an AARP card, we remember a time when ashes in Lutheran congregations were a novelty. I didn't see ashes, except on Roman Catholic foreheads, until I went to college, and, then, it was because I trucked up the hill to the seminary for the service.

Ashes are clearly adiaphora. They are not a sacrament. Whether ashes are employed or not is not a question that nullifies the proclamation of the Word. While I might not be thrilled with an Ash Wednesday without ashes, I would certainly not consider it blasphemous. Ashes are, in most cases, helpful, I believe, but they cannot be claimed that they are a *sine qua non*.

### **Ash Wednesday without ashes**

As I have mentioned, the reintroduction of ashes as a fairly common practice among American Lutherans has taken place within the living memory of our elder church members. It would be wicked to suggest that their piety was somehow deficient simply because ashes were not part of their observance. History should serve as a reminder that those things which we consider normative today have not always been so. Additionally, history shows us alternatives to current practice. Frequently, when faced with some new challenge, we ask, "What new thing can we do to address this?" In this case, we might better ask, "What old thing can we do to address this?" If our ancestors (and some of our own members) could hear the Word and enter into the season of Lent without ashes, might we do the same? Ironically, this may be the year that our Lenten fast begins with a fasting from the ashes.

In thinking about the Ash Wednesday liturgy, it is important to dissect it in such a way that we see its principal parts. The distinctive aspect of the Ash Wednesday liturgy is the penitential rite. Ashes are part of that penitential rite, but not an indispensable part. The ashes with their associated liturgical action are a symbolic support to the penitential rite, but the penitential rite stands on its own without the ashes. The reverse cannot be said to be the case. Ashes without a penitential rite of some sort are shorn of their context and risk becoming superstitious symbols rather than serving their proper role as pedagogic symbols.

All this is to say that the penitential rite can be used without the ashes as it had been for generations upon generations of American Lutherans.

### **Preaching on Ash Wednesday**

Beyond that, the place of the sermon should not be forgotten. It was once common not to celebrate the Eucharist in connection with Ash Wednesday. The inclusion of the Eucharist in the Ash Wednesday observance was part and parcel of the move for greater Eucharistic frequency. Current conditions may militate against Eucharistic celebrations in many settings. The sermon, however, can still be preached and should be preached (dare I say, must be preached) moreso this Ash Wednesday than any since the Spanish Flu. That many places may go without the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return" in connection with the thumbing of ash into the penitent's forehead simply means it is time to preach those words with greater fervor and greater clarity. It would be meet, right, and salutary to hear from the pulpit an honest reckoning with mortality.

### **Decorum and ashes**

That ashes are, in themselves, adiaphora does not imply that there is no decorum to be observed surrounding their use should we chose to use them just as there is a certain decorum to be observed in the placement of the Christmas tree (e.g., we would not place the Christmas tree in the baptismal font). Should a church chose to employ ashes, we should be careful not to engage in flights of unnecessary liturgical fancy. Often, a rush to do something circumvents intense critical thought about the implications and ramifications of such action. True, there are times one must act even without due consideration of implications and ramifications, but we are talking about ashes, not rescuing a drowning person. No one is going to die if there are no ashes this year, therefore, it is hard to conceive of this as some sort of liturgical emergency. If it is not an emergency, there is no need to take emergency measures. It should be considered that even those of us in the emergency services practice what we do in emergencies. Why? Because an emergency is not really the time to go off half-cocked. If we fool ourselves into thinking that this is a liturgical emergency, we are likely to go off half-cocked as we seldom practice such emergencies, and going off half-cocked can have most unfortunate consequences.

### **Glitter ashes**

Though not connected with the pandemic, I fully expect to see that somewhere in the church somebody will add glitter to their ashes. What was first started as an act of LGBTQ solidarity is likely to pop up this year because somebody will think that ashes are a downer and we all need cheering up. Don't! The power of the Gospel is the power to stare unflinchingly into maw of death. We wear the ashes because we know we are going to die. We don't pretend that death is not real for us. Our hope is not in pretending that death is not real but rather in the conviction that death is not the last word. We also wear the ashes to remember whereof we are made. We are dust and to dust we shall return. In this is our raw solidarity, one often forgotten. We are dust among dust. All humanity is dusty-kin. Adulteration of the ashes with glitter distracts from this thing that binds us together regardless of race, creed, color, party, or tribe. We wear the ashes as an act of penance, and there is nothing glittery about that.

### **Gloved imposition**

There is no liturgical reason one cannot use a glove to impose ashes. One will want to practice first and maybe with different gloves to see which works best. The biggest issue here will be the fact that one is thumbing multiple people. Does one sanitize between each person? Does one put a sponge with alcohol or some other disinfectant within reach to dab one's thumb between each head?

### **Masked imposition**

There is no liturgical reason one cannot wear a mask when imposing. Obviously the recipient cannot wear a face shield.

### **Sprinkling ashes on the head**

It is also the custom in some Christian communities to sprinkle ashes over the crown of the penitent's head instead of thumbing a cross into the forehead. This has not been common among us, but we would not deny its liturgical legitimacy. This may be the best option for those wanting to retain the administration of ashes without involving physical contact.

### **Q-tip ashes**

The administration of blessing oils with a swab is not uncommon, especially when the oil is considered particularly precious or rare. One might consider administering ashes with a swab, but sprinkling, as described above, stands within the broader tradition of the church.'

### **Self-imposition**

While there is no strict thing that says one cannot self-impose, if one thinks about the form, one can see that there is a formal difference between thumbing oneself and being thumbed by someone else. Agency is a thing, and there is a difference between me acting upon myself and someone else acting upon me. This is the reason why I usually have someone thumb me when I administer ashes. I experience the words, “Remember you are dust...,” differently when the other addresses me with those words as they thumb the ash into my forehead.

### **Relative risk**

If one deems it too risky to administer ashes, one should not. In the sprinkling method, there is probably no more risk involved than one would encounter going through the McDonald’s drive-thru. Still, we each have our own risk tolerances. The question may, however, be largely moot if the majority of our congregations are not holding in-person worship.

### **Ashes on the go**

I’ve spoken about this before at continuing ed (January 2017). Remembering that ashes support the penitential rite and not the other way around, one should consider the form employed in ashes on the go. What is the penitential rite? Where is the confession of sin? Where is the exhortation to repent and enter into the discipline of Lent? Without these things, the form is deficient. Granted, one may be able to develop a much abbreviated form, but these elements should not be neglected.

It should also be remembered that Ash Wednesday is not a disconnected liturgical observance. It is connected to the whole of Lent. Its function is to invite into Lent and begin Lent. The administration of ashes on the go without a clear invitation and exhortation with respect to Lent is deficient. To accept ashes without the slightest intention to enter into Lent betrays a failure to understand the ashes. To impose ashes without the slightest intention to encourage Lenten discipline in the recipient betrays an equal failure to understand the ashes.

Some would say people are too busy to sit through an Ash Wednesday service. Are they equally too busy for Lent? Some would say that the timing of the Ash Wednesday service is inconvenient for people. Are we clergy too busy to offer more than one service? A perfectly acceptable Ash Wednesday service can be conducted in 30 minutes, and that is with full *LBW* penitential rite, sermon, and even Eucharist (assuming you cut out all but one lesson, get to the point of your sermon, and dispense with various non-essentials like hymns and the like).

Some would say that it is important to get the Gospel out in the street for people to hear. I agree, but ashes are not the Gospel. In fact, if the only thing we do is a smudge with the words, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” we have not given them the Gospel. We have given the Law (The Hammer of Jeremiah) and only the Law. We are like those folks who scream the Law at passers-by except we are dressed better and are more polite. One could say that those who scream the Law are doing a better job than us because, at least, they tell people to repent. If all we do is smudge and say the *memento homo*, we do nothing more than tell the people they are going to die. There is nothing particularly polite about that.

### **Drive-thru ashes**

Some of the same questions raised by ashes on the go should likewise be raised here. Will there be a penitential rite? Will there be a confession of sin? Will there be an exhortation to the discipline of Lent? Furthermore, what Gospel will be preached to balance the Law that is the *memento homo*? This is not to

say that it cannot be done. It is to say that there are elements that should not be ignored.

### **Mail-ashes**

Same questions as those for Drive-thru ashes, but, in this case, there seems to be an even greater superstitious element.

### **Ashies**

Some of us are veterans of the “Ash Wars,” the lesser known fight to get ashes into the liturgical observance of Lutheran congregations. Few remember the intensity of Anti-Catholicism that prevailed at one time in Lutheran congregations. I can still hear the voices of beloved parishioners objecting to ashes and aptly quoting the Gospel text appointed for the day that roundly warns us against parading our piety before others. Those of us who fought to reintroduce ashes assured people that we do not take the ashes as a way to show our piety before others. We talked about the way in which external acts of piety help us to interiorize piety. We talked about Christian piety being something not thought well of by the general population, in other words, not earning any admiration from our neighbors, especially those who hated Catholics. Then came Facebook and Instagram etc. etc., and with them, eventually, came “ashies,” a selfie in which the subject is proudly displaying their ashes. “Ashies” are not enough to make me say, “Time to get rid of the ashes.” *Abusus non tollit usum*. Still, we need to help people understand that ashes are neither talisman nor fashion statement.

### **Closing thought**

This “ashies” phenomenon should nudge us to self-examination. To what degree is it symptom of a degeneration of piety? It is with that question that we might examine ourselves and ask: Have we become fixated upon the ashes to the point that we would amend this adiaphoron in a disorderly and inappropriate manner, with frivolity and offense, not as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church, but out of our desperation to retain this adiaphoron at all costs? When we are so desperate to retain an adiaphoron that we would do so in contravention of the *Formula*’s principle, we might consider that we have begun to treat this adiaphoron as if it were an essential.

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