

What is the significance of Ash Wednesday and ashes on the forehead?

Q: Would you please explain the significance of Ash Wednesday. I've seen some people in the past with black ash crosses on their foreheads.

A: Lutheran Worship: History and Practice, a commentary on Lutheran Worship, one of our Synod's hymnals, says this about ashes on Ash Wednesday: "Other customs may be used, particularly the imposition of ashes on those who wish it. This ancient act is a gesture of repentance and a powerful reminder about the meaning of the day. Ashes can symbolize dust-to-dustness and remind worshipers of the need for cleansing, scrubbing and purifying. If they are applied during an act of kneeling, the very posture of defeat and submission expresses humility before God."

The use of ashes on Ash Wednesday is a more recent custom among most LCMS congregations, although some have done it for decades. The ashes are usually derived from the burned palms from the previous Palm Sunday. Experience will show, however, that in obtaining ashes this way, it doesn't take many ashes to "ash" a whole congregation. Like sin, they are very dirty and go a long way. One palm leaf will produce enough ashes for several years.

Usually the pastor takes the ashes on the end of his thumb and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of each worshiper, saying these words: "Remember: you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This follows most effectively prior (or as part of) the Service Corporate Confession and Absolution on pp. 290-291 of Lutheran Service Book.

For more information, read the Frequently Asked Question about Lent (see page 10).

Usage: We urge you to contact an LCMS pastor in your area for more in-depth discussion.

Published by: LCMS Church Information Center

©The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295 888-843-5267 • infocenter@lcms.org •

www.lcms.org/faqs

[Return to Table of Contents](#)