



The Holy See

HOLY MASS, BLESSING AND IMPOSITION OF THE ASHES

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS READ BY CARDINAL ANGELO DE DONATIS

*Basilica of Santa Sabina
Wednesday, 5 March 2025*

[[Multimedia](#)]

This evening, we receive the imposition of the holy ashes. This brings to mind the *memory* of what we are, but also the *hope* of what we will be. The ashes remind us that we are dust, but they also set us on a journey towards the hope to which we are called. For Jesus descended to the dust of the earth and, by his Resurrection, has drawn us with himself into the Father's heart.

Thus the Lenten journey towards Easter unfolds amidst the *remembrance* of our fragility and the *hope* that, at the end of the road, the Risen Lord is waiting for us.

First, we must *remember*. We bow our heads in order to receive the ashes as if to look at ourselves, to look within ourselves. Indeed, the ashes help to remind us that our lives are fragile and insignificant: we are dust, from dust we were created, and to dust we shall return. Moreover, there are so many times when, looking at ourselves or at the reality that surrounds us, we realise that "everyone stands as a mere breath [...] for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up, and do not know who will gather" (*Ps* 39:5-6).

We learn this above all through the experience of our own fragility: our weariness, the weaknesses we have to come to terms with, the fears that dwell in us, the failures that consume us, the fleetingness of our dreams and the realisation that what we possess is ephemeral. Made of ashes and earth, we experience fragility through illness, poverty, and the hardships that can suddenly befall us and our families. We also experience it when, in the social and political realities of our

time, we find ourselves exposed to the “fine dust” that pollutes our world: ideological opposition, the abuse of power, the re-emergence of old ideologies based on identity that advocate exclusion, the exploitation of the earth’s resources, violence in all its forms and war between peoples. This “toxic dust” clouds the air of our planet impeding peaceful coexistence, while uncertainty and the fear of the future continue to increase.

Furthermore, the condition of fragility reminds us of the tragedy of death. In many ways, we try to banish death from our societies, so dependent on appearances, and even remove it from our language. Death, however, imposes itself as a reality with which we have to reckon, a sign of the precariousness and brevity of our lives.

Despite the masks we wear and the cleverly crafted ploys meant to distract us, the ashes remind us of who we are. This is good for us. It reshapes us, reduces the severity of our narcissism, brings us back to reality and makes us more humble and open to one another: none of us is God; we are all on a journey.

Lent, however, is also an invitation to rekindle our *hope*. Although we receive the ashes with our heads bowed in remembrance of who we are, the Lenten season does not end there. On the contrary, we are invited to lift our eyes to the One who rises from the depths of death and brings us from the ashes of sin and death to the glory of eternal life.

The ashes remind us of the hope to which we are called in Jesus, the Son of God, who has taken upon himself the dust of the earth and raised it to the heights of heaven. He descended into the abyss of dust, dying for us and reconciling us to the Father, as we heard from Saint Paul: “For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin” (2 *Cor* 5:21).

This, brothers and sisters, is the hope that restores to life the “ashes” of our lives. Without such hope, we are doomed passively to endure the fragility of our human condition. Particularly when faced with the experience of death, a lack of hope can lead us to fall into sadness and desolation, and we end up reasoning like fools: “Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end [...] the body will turn to ashes, and the spirit will dissolve like empty air” (*Wis* 2:1-3). Yet the hope of Easter that we journey towards reassures us of God’s forgiveness. Even while submerged in the ashes of sin, hope opens us up to the joyful acknowledgment of life: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth” (*Job* 19:25). Let us remember this: “Man is dust and to dust he shall return, but dust is precious in God’s eyes because God created man, destining him to immortality” (Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 17 February 2010).

Brothers and sisters, having received the ashes, we walk towards the hope of Easter. Let us turn back to God. Let us return to him with all our hearts (cf. *Joel* 2:12). Let us place him at the centre of our lives, so that the memory of what we are — fragile and mortal as ashes scattered upon the

wind — may finally be filled with the hope of the Risen Lord. Let us direct our lives towards him, becoming a sign of hope for the world. Let us learn from almsgiving to go beyond ourselves, sharing each other's needs and nurturing the hope of a fairer world. Let us learn from prayer to discover our need for God or, as Jacques Maritain put it, that we are “beggars for heaven”, and so foster the hope that beyond our frailties there is a Father waiting for us with open arms at the end of our earthly pilgrimage. Finally, let us learn from fasting that we do not live merely to satisfy our needs, but that, hungry for love and truth, only the love of God and of one another can truly satisfy us and give us hope for a better future.

Let us persevere in the certainty that ever since the Lord took upon himself the ashes of humanity, “the history of the earth is the history of heaven. God and man are bound together in a single destiny” (C. Carretto, *Il deserto nella città*, Roma 1986, 55), and he will forever sweep away the ashes of death and make us shine with newness of life.

With this hope in our hearts, let us begin our journey. Let us be reconciled with God.