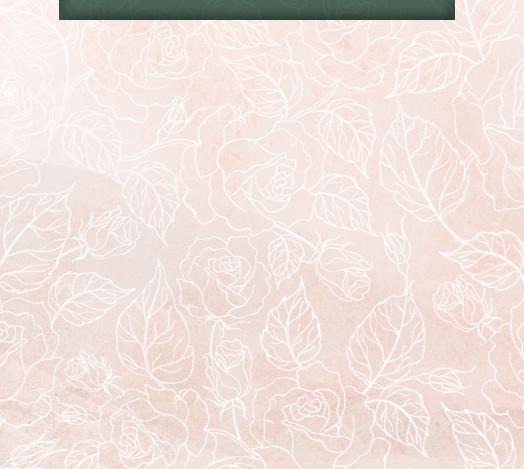
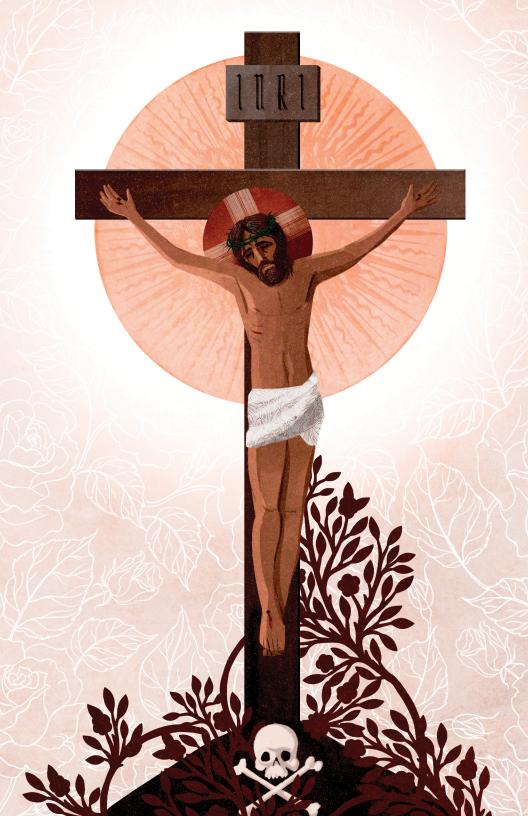
# WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY





#### WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY

# ASH WEDNESDAY

GRANT, O LORD, THAT WE MAY BEGIN WITH HOLY FASTING THIS CAMPAIGN OF CHRISTIAN SERVICE, SO THAT, AS WE TAKE UP BATTLE AGAINST SPIRITUAL EVILS, WE MAY BE ARMED WITH WEAPONS OF SELF-RESTRAINT. COLLECT FOR MASS OF THE DAY

#### TODAY'S READINGS

#### Jl 2:12–18; Ps 51; 2 Cor 5:20–6:2; Mt 6:1–6, 16–18

#### MEMENTO MORI

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." These words, spoken over the recipient of the ashen smudge at Mass today, first came from the mouth of God. They are the final words of the sentence laid upon the first man, Adam, who listened not to the voice of God but heeded that of another. In the first sin, "man preferred himself to God and by that very act scorned him" (CCC 398).

The name Adam is actually a Hebrew word that means "one who is made from the earth." The Latin word for earth, *humus*, anchors the English word "human." "Humility," the virtue opposed to the vice of pride, rises from the same root. The humble one remains well aware of humanity's earthly origins; to be humble is literally to stay close to the earth and to maintain the proper ordering of creature to Creator.

The entire pattern of fallen humanity's sinful machinations is an endless repetition of their attempt to live without God, a repetition in which they forget the damage caused by their last attempt. God's words to the first man would, over time, become the basis of an ascetical practice taken up in every age, enshrined in meditations upon one's own mortality: *memento mori*. Remember your death.

Throughout sacred scripture, ashes are a sign of repentance, a reminder of the dust. Salvation passes, throughout history, into the hearts of those who put off the arrogance of the ancient foe's rebellion and humbly return to God.

For us, this is Lent. At the head of the footpath, Ash Wednesday calls us to "begin with holy fasting," to "take up battle against spiritual evils," and to be "armed with weapons of self-restraint." These themes will unfold throughout the season, but for now it suffices to state and hold before our consciousness two basic facts. First, the return to God requires something of us; it is a costly endeavor. Second, our return is fueled by the recognition and ensuing admission that *we* wandered off in the first place, that we departed from the way God had set before us.

# REFLECT

In what ways have you wandered from God in the past year? Be as specific as you can. What will you fast from this Lent? How do you hope each form of fasting that you choose will help you draw closer to God? Describe how you feel when you consider the idea of returning to the path God has set for you.



#### WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY—ASH WEDNESDAY

#### PRAY

LORD, AS I BEGIN THIS SEASON OF REPENTANCE, GIVE ME HUMILITY AND A DEEP RECOGNITION OF MY NEED FOR YOU. AMEN.

#### WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY

# THURSDAY

PROMPT OUR ACTIONS WITH YOUR INSPIRATION, WE PRAY, O LORD, AND FURTHER THEM WITH YOUR CONSTANT HELP, THAT ALL WE DO MAY ALWAYS BEGIN FROM YOU AND BY YOU BE BROUGHT TO COMPLETION.

COLLECT FOR MASS OF THE DAY

#### TODAY'S READINGS

Dt 30:15-20; Ps 1; Lk 9:22-25

#### AWAKENING THE SOUL

Pride bears within it the lie that God either does not exist or is not worthy of our homage. Written in subtler script within the same deception is the quiet sense of the fallen heart that we are on our own and must rely on ourselves. Every interior sorrow weighs heavier under this sense that we are alone in our sufferings.

Conversion and the awakening of the soul to sin's futility is a remarkably beautiful process. Yet the simple recognition that we must change course is not complete in itself. A second snare lies before us as we begin our return to God. As we acknowledge the anguish of life outside of God, we can easily conclude that the return to God is our own affair to manage. Self-reliance has a deep root.

In fact, it is God who awakens in the forlorn soul the desire to return. And it is God who prompts the good actions that follow. The Collect from today's Mass quickly guards us against self-reliance and the long-looming sense that holiness is our own private project: "Prompt our actions with your inspiration, we pray, O Lord, and further them with your constant help."

The type of conversion that is both profound and lasting actually requires a great degree of surrender. Along with surrender comes the freedom to recognize that the process that lies ahead is one of cooperation, of coming out of sin's solitary confinement and into a dynamic and living relationship of communion.

Denying self and carrying the cross are pathways to which Christ calls us in today's gospel. Our prayer is "that all we do may always begin from you and by you be brought to completion." If Christ asks it of us, our consolation lies in the fact that he will prompt us forward and bring about its achievement.

# REFLECT

When in your life have you shut out God and relied entirely on yourself? What ideas or patterns of thinking convinced you that you were on your own? How did you feel? How does "sin's solitary confinement" take shape in your life? In other words, when you become stuck in a pattern of sinful behavior, how does that look? And how do you best break out of it?

#### WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY—THURSDAY

#### PRAY

I SURRENDER TO YOUR PLANS FOR MY SALVATION, LORD. AMEN.

# WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY

# FRIDAY

SHOW GRACIOUS FAVOR, O LORD, WE PRAY, TO THE WORKS OF PENANCE WE HAVE BEGUN, THAT WE MAY HAVE STRENGTH TO ACCOMPLISH WITH SINCERITY THE BODILY OBSERVANCES WE UNDERTAKE.

COLLECT FOR MASS OF THE DAY