
You Are the Ashes to Go

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

For the past several years, some media outlets have used "ashes to go" as the most interesting thing they could find when they looked for an angle on the news that people might actually read or watch. "Ashes to go" has come to be the name given to that practice whereby some priests, on Ash Wednesday, have not only imposed ashes upon the foreheads of those who come to church, but the priests have also gone out to the streets and sidewalks of their communities and offered the imposition of ashes to anyone walking by who desired it.

The practice is fine with me. I find it neither astonishing nor irreverent, nor even unadvisable. If it works to spread some part of the Christian gospel, that is a good thing. In light of the continuing coverage of Ash Wednesday people, however, I want to suggest two things to Christians, and to anyone, who is drawn to the latest story.

One suggestion is this: Let us, the church, be careful about allowing other organizations to tell our story, especially when those organizations "some media outlets" merely want to check off the "Let's see if the Christians are doing anything new or titillating this year" box. The way the ritual is administered is not the most important thing.

Which leads to my second suggestion: On Ash Wednesday, the real "ashes to go" are not the ashes themselves; the real ashes are the people. The real ashes are us, those of us who take the time, even if only for a moment, to acknowledge that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Whether we receive our ashes in church or on the street, whether we even accept the name "Christian" or not, I urge us to see ourselves "not the ashes" as the most important sacramental sign of Ash Wednesday.

A holy Lent begins with humility, which is a deep word. The word "humility," comes from the Latin word, "humus," which means, of course, "organic earth," or "dirt." I think humus is actually "good dirt." For Christians, to be humble does not mean getting stepped on like a doormat; it means being "down to earth" like good and honest soil. Humility means being real, being authentic about who we are, not thinking more about ourselves than what we really are. Humility means being the fertile soil which allows great things to grow.

The ash smear on our foreheads, then, is not designed to be a media spectacle. It is a reminder to us that we are to be in the world as humble people, people of good dirt, fertile people who have something honest to offer the world.

Indeed, Ash Wednesday people are supposed to go out into the world, not so much *with* ashes, but *as* ashes. Something wonderful happens around us when we lower ourselves, when we trust our true selves and not some exalted notion of ourselves. What happens is that the real gifts of the world, and the people around us, actually come alive and grow. When we become fertile for others, then others grow and flourish! This year, then, let us ourselves be the "ashes to go," the "good dirt" sent into the world so that others may grow.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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