Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis arrives in procession to celebrate Ash Wednesday Mass at the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome Feb. 26, 2020. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Ashes not only symbolize humanity's frail mortality but are also a reminder of God's infinite love of people, whom he created from dust, Pope Francis said.

While men and women are just "dust in the universe" compared to the galaxies and space, "we are thus a dust that is precious, destined for eternal life" with God, the pope said Feb. 26, celebrating Mass and distributing ashes at the beginning of Lent.

"For Lent is not a time for useless sermons, but for recognizing that our lowly ashes are loved by God," he said. "It is a time of grace, a time for letting God gaze upon us with love and in this way change our lives. We were put in this world to go from ashes to life."

After a brief prayer at the Benedictine's Monastery of St. Anselm, Francis walked in the traditional Ash Wednesday procession to the nearby Dominican-run Basilica of Santa Sabina, on Rome's Aventine Hill, for the Mass.

The pope received ashes on his head from 95-year-old Cardinal Jozef Tomko, titular cardinal of the basilica, and distributed ashes to the cardinals present, as well as to Benedictines from St. Anselm, Dominicans from Santa Sabina and some laypeople.

In his homily, the pope said that the placing of ashes on the forehead is a reminder that although humanity is merely dust in the earth, it can also become something wondrous "if we allow ourselves to be shaped by the hands of God."

"More often than not, though, especially at times of difficulty and loneliness, we only see our dust. But the Lord encourages us: In his eyes, our littleness is of infinite value. So, let us take heart: We were born to be loved; we were born to be children of God," he said.

Christians are called to avoid "the fleeting realities of this world," which ultimately turn to dust, and instead embrace the life that God wishes to give them, he said.

If a person lives to earn money or seek pleasure, prestige or promotions, he or she is "simply staring at dust," the pope said.

"That is not why we have been put in this world," he said. "We are worth so much more. We live for so much more, for we are meant to make God's dream a reality and to love."

Ashes are also a reminder of the "dust of death" brought on by war and of "lives reduced to ashes," including the lives of those who are unwelcomed, the poor and "the abandoned elderly."

"We continue to destroy ourselves, to return to ashes and dust," the pope said. "Even in the church, the house of God, we have let so much dust collect, the dust of worldliness."

The fire of God's love, he added, is often extinguished by the "ashes of hypocrisy," especially in Christians who do acts of charity, prayer or fasting "only to be recognized, to look good, to satisfy our ego."

"How often do we profess to be Christians, yet in our hearts readily yield to passions that enslave us. How often do we preach one thing and practice another. How many times do we make ourselves look good on the outside while nursing grudges within. How much duplicity do we have in our hearts. All this is dust that besmirches, ashes that extinguish the fire of love," the pope said.

Lent, he said, "is a time of healing" and through contemplating the cross and the sacrament of penance, Christians can encounter God's forgiving love, which "consumes the ashes of our sin."

"The embrace of the Father in confession renews us from inside and purifies our heart," Francis said. "Let us allow ourselves to be loved, so that we can give love in return. Let us allow ourselves to stand up and walk toward Easter. Then we will experience the joy of discovering how God raises us up from our ashes."

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