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Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, sprinkles ashes on the head of Pope Francis during Ash Wednesday Mass at the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome Feb. 22, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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What matters is the truth and the love that God sees, not what is superficial, showy and self-centered, Pope Francis said during a Mass to mark the beginning of Lent.

Lent is the time, he said, "to proclaim that God alone is Lord, to drop the pretense of being self-sufficient and the need to put ourselves at the center of things, to be the top of the class, to think that by our own abilities we can succeed in life and transform the world around us."

"How many distractions and trifles distract us from the things that really count! How often do we get caught up in our own wants and needs, lose sight of the heart of the matter, and fail to embrace the true meaning of our lives in this world!" he said.

"Lent is a time of truth, a time to drop the masks we put on each day to appear perfect in the eyes of the world," he said, and to "reject lies and hypocrisy. Not the lies and hypocrisies of others, but our own."

Francis, dressed in the purple vestments of the Lenten season, celebrated an Ash Wednesday Mass Feb. 22 at Rome's Basilica of Santa Sabina. The liturgy began with a procession from the nearby Church of St. Anselm on the Aventine Hill. However, Francis did not do the traditional walk because a painful knee has limited his mobility.

At the Basilica of Santa Sabina, the pope received ashes on the top of his head from Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, who also was the main celebrant at the altar. Piacenza, who is head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, distributed ashes to a number of cardinals, bishops and others attending the Mass.

In his homily, the pope said the Lenten period is "the favorable time" for returning to what is essential and true, and to be reconciled with God and each other.

The rite of the imposition of ashes reminds people to "return to the truth about ourselves," which is that "the Lord alone is God and we are the work of his hands."

God, a tender and merciful father, always waits for his children to reconcile with him and he "constantly urges us not to despair, even when we lie fallen in the dust of our weakness and sin."

The ashes also invite the faithful to rebuild their relationships with others, he said.

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Lent, the pope said, is a time to "break the chains of our individualism" and to rediscover "our companions along the journey of each day" through encounter and listening, and "to learn once more to love them as brothers and sisters."

The three great paths to take on this journey of truth and reconciliation, he said, are the paths of almsgiving, prayer and fasting.

However, they must be done with a heart that is truly renewed and sincere, he said.

"All too often, our gestures and rites have no impact on our lives; they remain superficial. Perhaps we perform them only to gain the admiration or esteem of others," the pope said.

However, the pope warned, "outward displays, human judgments and the world's approval count for nothing; the only thing that truly matters is the truth and love that God himself sees."

He asked that the faithful use the 40 days of Lent to: "rediscover the joy, not of accumulating material goods, but of caring for those who are poor and afflicted"; to put God at the center of one's life and pray and dialogue with him from the heart; and to become free "from the dictatorship of full schedules, crowded agendas and superficial needs, and choose the things that truly matter."

"The ashes we receive this evening tell us that every presumption of self-sufficiency is false and that self-idolatry is destructive, imprisoning us in isolation and loneliness," Francis said. "Life is instead a relationship: we receive it from God and from our parents, and we can always revive and renew it thanks to the Lord and to those he puts at our side."