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Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, sprinkles ashes on Pope Francis' head during Ash Wednesday Mass at the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome Feb. 14, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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In an age when even one's most intimate thoughts and feelings can become fodder for social media, Lent is a time to cast aside appearances and to find God at work in the depths of the heart, Pope Francis said.

Without realizing it, Christians have become immersed "in a world in which everything, including our emotions and deepest feelings, has to become 'social,'" the pope said while celebrating Mass at the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome to mark the beginning of Lent Feb. 14.

Today, "even the most tragic and painful experiences risk not having a quiet place where they can be kept," he said. "Everything has to be exposed, shown off, fed to the gossip mill of the moment."

Dressed in purple vestments to mark the Lenten season, Francis said Lent is a chance for Christians to ensure their relationship with God "is not reduced to mere outward show."

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Lent "immerses us in a bath of purification," he said. "It means looking within ourselves and acknowledging our real identity, removing the masks we so often wear, slowing the frantic pace of our lives and embracing the truth of who we are."

The Lenten practices of "almsgiving, prayer and fasting are not mere external practices; they are paths that lead to the heart, to the core of the Christian life," he added, encouraging Christians to "love the brothers and sisters all around us, to be considerate to others, to feel compassion, to show mercy, to share all that we are and all that we have with those in need."

The liturgy began with a prayer at the nearby Church of St. Anselm, which is part of a Benedictine monastery on Rome's Aventine Hill. Chanting the litany of saints, cardinals, joined by Benedictine and Dominican religious, then processed to the Basilica of Santa Sabina — considered the mother church of the Dominican order — for Mass.

Francis, who has regularly used a wheelchair since May 2022, did not participate in the procession. In the basilica, the pope blessed the ashes with holy water, praying that "we recognize that we are dust and to dust we will return."

The pope received ashes from Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, who also was the Mass' main celebrant at the altar.

In his homily, Francis said "the ashes placed on our head invite us to rediscover the secret of life."

"We are ashes on which God has breathed his breath of life," he said. " And if, in the ashes that we are, the fire of the love of God burns, then we will discover that we have indeed been shaped by that love and called to love others in turn."



Altar servers lead the procession from the Church of St. Anselm to the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome for the celebration of Ash Wednesday Mass with Pope Francis Feb. 14, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Francis also recalled the day's Gospel reading from St. Matthew, in which Jesus tells his disciples not to make a public show of their prayer but to rather "go to your inner room" to pray.

Jesus' message "is a salutary invitation for us, who so often live on the surface of things, who are so concerned to be noticed, who constantly need to be admired and appreciated," he said.

The pope urged Christians to "return to the center of yourself," where "so many fears, feelings of guilt and sin are lurking."

"Precisely there the Lord has descended in order to heal and cleanse you," he said. "Let us enter into our inner chamber: There the Lord dwells, there our frailty is accepted and we are loved unconditionally."

Francis suggested that during Lent Christians make space to incorporate silent adoration into their lives, as practiced by Moses, Elijah, Mary and Jesus.

"Have we realized that we've lost the meaning of adoration? Let us return to adoration," he said.

Like St. Francis of Assisi, Christians should "strip ourselves of worldly trappings and return to the heart, to what is essential," the pope said. "Let us acknowledge what we are: dust loved by God."