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**Recommendations for Ash Wednesday**

“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Joel 2:12-13

My siblings in Christ,

Although it is still a month away, many of you are asking what to do about administering ashes on Ash Wednesday. While we find great meaning in this symbol and while it is also a sacred opportunity for us to connect with our communities through administering ashes to staff at hospitals and commuters at train stations, we must remain mindful of health and safety.

The tradition of imposition of ashes is part of who we are as people of faith and the symbolism is transformative. But I must also remind you that we are living through a time where the virus has taken many lives. I care about your health and safety and it is at the forefront of all my prayers. For that reason, I would start by reminding you that according to our Book of Common Prayer, ashes are, in fact, entirely optional. If you choose to offer ashes, I will remind you of another part of our rubrics, which is seldom exercised. The Officiant may sprinkle the ashes as opposed to imposing them on the forehead. Sprinkling ashes over the head allows the clergy person to remain at a slightly greater distance and avoid physical contact. While it may not be as satisfying to the recipient (since there will be no visible cross), this method is, in fact, a much more ancient method of observing the rite.

Since we expect to be back in Phase II, you may gather in-person. If you do, I would suggest the sprinkling of ashes ensuring that you explain the reason and historical significance behind them to the faithful. It is also preferable if the ashes are ground as finely as possible and are not mixed with any water or oil. You should also make sure you have a greater volume of ashes prepared since sprinkling requires two to three times the amount used if imposed.

However, if you choose to impose the ashes, I require that you ensure you are following all the protocols as relates to the distribution of communion and ensure you sanitize your hands between each person. This requirement holds whether or not you are wearing gloves. Alternatively, you may use a single-use applicator such as a Q-tip which would eliminate the need to sanitize unless contact is made.

In addition, there are a several options which you may consider. These include:

* Preparing a bowl of ashes and allowing people to self-administer using a Q-tip or other single-use applicator. The cleric can then stand nearby and say the words of imposition.
* Similarly, you may offer ashes via a drive thru, placing the bowl of ashes and single-use applicators on a tray which would be offered to the person in the car. Please note this is permissible only because ashes are not a sacrament.
* Instead of ashes this year you could offer a blessing or other appropriate prayer.

Obviously, any in-person gathering should strictly adhere to our protocols when it comes to masking, maintaining as much distance as possible between people and minimizing the length of time anyone is in close proximity to one another. If you are offering “Ashes to Go” you should be particularly mindful to ensure distance, offer clear instruction and otherwise act to protect your own health and safety as well as those who come to you.

The holy season of Lent calls us to remember our mortality. As we enter into let us take every precaution to protect and preserve the lives of those in our care.

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