

## COVID changes papal plan

BY CINDY WOODEN  
Catholic News Service

### VATICAN CITY

Pope Francis will celebrate Ash Wednesday Mass Feb. 17 in St. Peter's Basilica rather than making the traditional walk from the Church of St. Anselm to the Basilica of Santa Sabina on Rome's Aventine Hill, the Vatican said.

Because of ongoing concerns about drawing a crowd and the potential that could have for spreading the coronavirus, the Mass and distribution of ashes will take place with a congregation of about 100 people at the Altar of the Chair in the basilica as has been the practice for the past several months, the Vatican press office said Feb. 5.

Pope Francis will not hold his weekly general audience that day.

The "pilgrimage" from the "station church" of St. Anselm to the "station church" Santa Sabina is an ancient Rome tradition revived in the early 1960s by St. John XXIII. A church was designated as a "station church" because of its prominence in early Christianity or because it was constructed on the burial site of a saint or martyr of the early church. In long-ago Lents, popes would gather with the faithful of Rome at a different church each day and then walk together to another church for Mass, making a pilgrimage from one stop or station to another until Easter.

An instruction from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments regarding the distribution of ashes during the pandemic will not make a difference at the Vatican since the traditional practice there was to sprinkle ashes on the crown of people's heads rather than to rub them on a person's forehead.

The Vatican also said Feb. 5 that the preacher of the papal household, Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, would offer Lenten reflections to the Pope and members of the Roman Curia on most Fridays of Lent, as is normal, but the morning meetings will take place in the Vatican audience hall.

# Season of renewal begins

When is the best time to repent? A couple of weeks ago this question came up during my telephone conversation with a friend about Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 17. Christians normally associate the word "repent" with Lent because we think of Lent as a special time of reflection, a time of penitence and a time to return to the Lord.

Every year we look forward to celebrating Ash Wednesday as part of our preparation for our Lenten journey. The ritual of having our foreheads marked with ashes in the form of a cross symbolizes our frailty, our brokenness. The ritual also reminds us of Jesus' call — "to repent and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).

On Ash Wednesday, we also hear the priest say the Opening Prayer at Mass, "Grant O God, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service so that as we take up battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with weapons of self restraint" (Roman Missal, p. 193). Ash Wednesday therefore serves as a marker to spiritually lead us into embracing the spirit of Lent.

However, with the lockdown and other restrictions put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we might be wondering how to make this year's Lent as traditional as in the past. With many of us staying away from church, how can we all make this Lent spiritually meaningful to us?

Over the past year the pandemic has drawn our attention to what is most important in our lives — life itself. We may not have had the opportunity to come together to experience some of the spiritual



Ash Wednesday leads us into embracing the spirit of Lent. In this pandemic year, we need to look to non-traditional ways of doing so. (CNS photo/Jeffrey Bruno)



FR. YAW ACHEAMPONG

practices that deepen our spiritual lives. For those of us who believe that Jesus gave His life to save us (Galatians 1:4), perhaps we can take this Lent as a time to think about the state of our spiritual lives — our lives in Christ. As part of our preparation for our Lenten discipline, we can ponder these questions: How has our absence from the church affected our spiritual lives? In what ways have we turned away from God?

As Christians, our journey of life is to be Christ-centred in all situations and circumstances. But

we also acknowledge our challenges of living with Christ as our focus. In his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (On the Call to Holiness in Today's World), Pope Francis talks about how our path towards holiness is a constant battle against the devil. "Along this journey, the cultivation of all that is good, progress in the spiritual life and growth in love are the best counterbalance to evil" (163).

Lent is that part of the Christian journey that the Church has given us to examine our progress in the spiritual life. This is the time that we open our hearts to the working of the Holy Spirit to help us recognize those areas in our lives that need to be transformed.

We are always being called to make changes in our lives so as to live as people who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:7). In his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship), Pope Francis uses the story of the Good

Samaritan to describe what it means for us to live the Christian life. He writes: "Each day offers us a new opportunity, a new possibility . . . We have the space we need for co-responsibility in creating and putting into place new processes and changes" (77).

So, what do we need to do for our spiritual growth and renewal? How can this Lent help us correct our faults and return to God? The Scriptures for Ash Wednesday and during Lent hold up models of Christian life for us to consider and to imitate for our Lenten discipline.

The Scriptures present the characteristics of the Christian life as a spiritual relationship with God, a life of service to God and community and fidelity to God. The Scripture readings also emphasize that it is not what we do that matters most but how we do it. Whichever Lenten discipline we decide to practice we need to perform the discipline with a contrite heart and a desire to change.

As we begin our Lenten campaign, let us pray that our act of self-reflection may lead us to examine the type of relationship we have had with Christ in the past and the type we hope to develop that is life-giving. With Jesus as our companion on our journey, we hope that with our life renewed, we would be spiritually ready to celebrate Easter. Let us also use this Lent to prepare us to serve our communities beyond the pandemic.

Have a spirit-filled Lenten journey.

(Fr. Acheampong is pastor at Our Lady of Peace Parish in Toronto.)

## A different look to Ash Wednesday

BY MICHAEL SWAN  
The Catholic Register

COVID has not cancelled Lent, nor Ash Wednesday, though a few things will feel a little different.

In the Archdiocese of Toronto and much of Canada, pastors will be offering slimmed down Ash Wednesday services Feb. 17, but also on the following three days until noon Saturday.

With Toronto church attendance capped at 10 due to pandemic restrictions, the extra days for distribution of ashes will give more Catholics an opportunity to begin the Lenten season receiving ashes, Cardinal Thomas Collins said in a Jan. 29 note to priests.

There are two versions of the liturgy for distribution of ashes — one that includes reception of the Eucharist and another without.

The two approved services do not stipulate that the minister distributing ashes must be a priest. "A priest, deacon, extraordinary minister of Holy Communion or other properly deputed person" are all authorized to lead the service.

Physically drawing a cross on a parishioner's forehead is not recommended, says a note from the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments. "The priest takes the ashes and sprinkles them on the head of each one," said the note signed by Cardinal Robert Sarah.

Though Lent itself remains a season of fasting, prayer, charity and focus on God, things may feel a little different, Collins wrote.



Cardinal Collins

"Traditional practices such as attending daily Mass during Lent, Stations of the Cross, etc. are not possible at this time," he said. "The current pandemic restrictions will force us once again to fast from many Lenten traditions and we offer these sacrifices in addition to our prayers for those who are sick and those who have died, as part of our Lenten journey."

But the basics remain. In keeping with the 1984 decree from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the days of fasting for Catholics between the ages of 18 and 60 are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Fridays (both in the Lenten season and outside of it) are days of abstinence from meat for those 14 and older, but Catholics may substitute special acts of charity or piety instead of abstinence.

For pandemic regulations in your municipality, check your parish and diocesan websites.