

Ash Wednesday Carries Deep Meaning for St. Mary's Students, Others Throughout Region

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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ALTON - Each year, St. Mary's Catholic School students participate in Ash Wednesday services.

A large group of St. Mary's elementary and middle school students in Alton received their ashes at a Mass held simultaneously at the church and middle school at 8 a.m. Wednesday. A regular Mass for parishioners was held at noon at St. Mary's Catholic Church.

Ash Wednesday is described as a Christian holy day of prayer, fasting, and repentance. It is preceded by Shrove Tuesday and falls on the first day of Lent, the six weeks of penitence before Easter. Ash Wednesday is observed by many Christians, including Anglicans, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Old Catholics, Methodists, Nazarenes, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, and some Baptists.

Ash Wednesday gets its name from the placing of repentance ashes on the foreheads of participants to either the words "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" or the dictum "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. The ashes may be prepared by burning palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebrations.

St. Mary's Father Paul Nguyen said he is extremely thankful to see the students and others in the congregation receive their ashes. He said it helps them understand the importance of the day and the beginning of Lent and sacrifices ahead.

"Ash Wednesday is a public sign and a gesture to make a statement we are not living for ourselves but something better," Father Paul Nguyen said. "It is an acknowledgment we need to change some things in our life during Lent. It is meant to show we renew our life and will make changes according to the commandments in a direction Jesus indicated."

St. Mary's had an 8 a.m. service that was held to encompass the children, then another Ash Wednesday Mass at noon.

Ash Wednesday is definitely "a moment of unity for us as a parish and for the school, as we enter Lent," Father Nguyen said.

St. Mary's School focuses considerable attention to the importance of feeding and sheltering the poor in one way or another during Lent, Father Nguyen said. He added this is something he views as a vital concept for children to understand for their future.







[John Hentrich also contributed to this story.](#)