



Cardinal Angelo De Donatis, head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, celebrates Ash Wednesday Mass at the Basilica of Santa Sabina March 5 in Rome. Pope Francis, who usually would preside, was receiving treatment at Rome's Gemelli Hospital. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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While Pope Francis remained in Rome's Gemelli Hospital, Italian Cardinal [Angelo De Donatis](#) celebrated the Ash Wednesday Mass in his place in a poignant ceremony at the Basilica of Santa Sabina on Aventine Hill in Rome.

De Donatis, who is close to Francis and who led the traditional Ash Wednesday procession, delivered a special message about the pope before reading a homily — written by Francis — at the Mass attended by about two dozen cardinals and archbishops of the Roman Curia.

"We feel deeply united with him at this time and thank him for the offering of his prayer and sufferings for the good of the whole church and the whole world," the cardinal said in Italian.

[Related:](#) [Pope Francis spends Ash Wednesday in hospital, but with positive recovery signs](#)

Ash Wednesday marked the 88-year-old pontiff's 20th day in hospital, where doctors noted positive developments in his recovery at the start of Lent, a time in which Catholics around the world are called to prayer, fasting and charitable works. Francis had previously missed an Ash Wednesday Mass in March 2022 due to severe knee pain.

The pope was able to participate in a private rite of blessing of the Holy Ashes, which he received, along with the Eucharist. The pope also phoned Fr. Gabriel Romanelli, the parish priest of the Holy Family church in Gaza, which he has called almost nightly since the start of Israel's siege of the Gaza Strip.

The somber ceremony at Santa Sabina Basilica was punctuated by having a hospitalized pontiff unable to take part in the liturgy. Francis' involvement came in the form of his written homily in which the pontiff linked his personal frailty with the broader struggles of the world. Francis referred to what he called the "fine dust" that pollutes society.

"We experience fragility through illness, poverty, and the hardships that can suddenly befall us and our families," the pontiff said in the written homily.

"We also experience it when, in the social and political realities of our time, we find ourselves exposed to the 'fine dust' that pollutes our world: ideological opposition, the abuse of power, the reemergence of old ideologies based on identity that advocate exclusion, the exploitation of the earth's resources, violence in all its forms and war between peoples."



A priest distributes ashes during Ash Wednesday Mass at the Basilica of Santa Sabina, March 5 in Rome. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

'We experience fragility through illness, poverty, and the hardships that can suddenly befall us and our families.'

Pope Francis

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This recognition of the world's brokenness, the pope wrote, leads us to humility.

"Despite the masks we wear and the cleverly crafted ploys meant to distract us, the ashes remind us of who we are," the pope wrote. "This is good for us. It reshapes us, reduces the severity of our narcissism, brings us back to reality and makes us more humble and open to one another: none of us is God; we are all on a journey."

However, Lent is not just about reflecting on human weakness — it is also about embracing the hope of redemption, Francis said.

"Although we receive the ashes with our heads bowed in remembrance of who we are, the Lenten season does not end there," he said. "On the contrary, we are invited to lift our eyes to the One who rises from the depths of death and brings us from the ashes of sin and death to the glory of eternal life."

[De Donatis, a longtime Vatican official](#) who is head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, has held significant roles in the church hierarchy. He was appointed cardinal in 2018 and took on the role of major penitentiary in April 2024.



Cardinal Angelo De Donatis, head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, gives his blessing at the conclusion of Ash Wednesday Mass in the Basilica of Santa Sabina, March 5 in Rome. Pope Francis, who is hospitalized, delegated the cardinal to preside at the liturgy. (CNS/Vatican Media)

As the head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, a church court, De Donatis oversees matters related to the internal forum and indulgences and works on the church's ministries of reconciliation and forgiveness. He previously served as vicar general of the Diocese of Rome, archpriest of the Basilica of St. John Lateran and apostolic administrator of Ostia.

De Donatis also played a key role in leading meditations for the spiritual exercises of the Roman Curia in 2014.

His leadership on Ash Wednesday underscores his significance in the Vatican's hierarchy and his close connection to Francis.



The Basilica of Santa Sabina on the Aventine Hill in Rome, where more than 20 cardinals and archbishops of the Roman Curia gathered for Ash Wednesday Mass on March 5 (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Reading the text of the pope's homily for the start of the season of Lent, the cardinal reminded the congregation that Francis urged them to follow concrete steps toward reconciliation and transformation:

"Brothers and sisters, having received the ashes, we walk towards the hope of Easter. Let us turn back to God. Let us return to him with all our hearts. Let us place him at the center of our lives, so that the memory of what we are — fragile and mortal as ashes scattered upon the wind — may finally be filled with the hope of the risen Lord.

"With this hope in our hearts," the pope's message continued, "let us begin our journey. Let us be reconciled with God."

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This story appears in the [Pope Francis' health crisis](#) and [Lent 2025](#) feature series.