

A home burns in Altadena, California, following the Eaton Fire, which began Jan. 7. (OSV News/Courtesy of Trena Spurlock)



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As we approach Ash Wednesday once again, I find myself thinking about it differently this year. It is the word "ash" that has caused this shift. I'm sure that you, like me, watched with so many across the country, as entire sections of Los Angeles burned in January. Individuals, families and communities lost their homes, their schools, their churches, their businesses. Some lost their lives. It all went up in ash.

So, what is ash? And how are the ashes of Los Angeles connected to the ashes we bless and receive on Ash Wednesday? Or are they connected?

Google taught me that ash is the powdery substance that is left over after a fuel undergoes combustion. To be a bit more accurate, it is the result of incomplete combustion, meaning there wasn't enough oxygen present when the material burned to completely consume it. This results in soot, smoke and ash. Think of what remains after a fire in a fireplace. The ashes we use on Ash Wednesday are formed from the burning of last year's palm branches. The ashes in Los Angeles came from the homes, businesses and other buildings, as well as vehicles, trees and materials on the ground.



A woman receives ashes during Pope Francis' Ash Wednesday Mass at the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome Feb. 14, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

One more thing about ash: There are different types. Wood ash, for example, is helpful as compost and can be used to melt ice, clean glass, shine silver, and even de-skunk pets. Who knew? But think of how a forest regenerates after a fire, fertilized by ash.

The difficulty I had reconciling the Los Angeles fires and Ash Wednesday ashes came from the fact that the former were toxic. They contain materials used in cars, electronics and many household and commercial products. No one knows the extent of the dangers contained in the ashes.

Similar to the symbol of water that we use sacramentally in baptism, ashes are a multivalent symbol. Water can refresh, cleanse and nourish, but it can also flood, drown and destroy. Ashes can cleanse and promote new growth in a garden or forest, but they can also be a toxic pollutant.

Why do we use ashes on Ash Wednesday? Their use goes back to the Old Testament when they were a symbol of repentance and mourning. When Jonah proclaimed that the city of Nineveh would be destroyed, its king covered himself with ashes as a sign of repentance. There are many other examples in the Old Testament. Early Christians used ashes to mark the public penance of an individual penitent. Eventually, they became a symbol for all, marking the heads of an entire congregation as a collective sign of penance, as we now do on Ash Wednesday.

In addition to mourning and repentance, ashes signify the fragility and limitations of life. One day LA's homes, schools, stores and churches were filled with people and possessions; the next day they turned to ash. Homes that raised generations of families, schools that taught decades of students, businesses that employed and served myriad communities were enveloped in the powerful fire fed by Santa Ana winds. Life is fragile and the structures that house and sustain life — things that we think will last forever — collapse in the face of something stronger.

Ash Wednesday reminds us of our own fragility and our limitations. These are realities that we seldom ponder and, if we are honest, prefer to avoid. The ashes on our foreheads are an outward sign, a sacramental, that point to our fragility and limitations as well as the tentativeness of life. The words we often hear when we receive ashes come from Genesis, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It is a stark reminder of the fragility of life.

I learned a strong lesson about the value of life from my father. When we were teenagers, my siblings and I took turns causing fender benders as we learned to drive. In fact, my mother used to say that she would just get the car back from the repair shop when someone else would hit a hydrant or back into a telephone pole. We would come home from a mishap, thinking that we would be in big time trouble, but my father would always say, "It is only plastic. You are fine and that's all that matters." We learned that life in all its fragility is far more valuable than any destructible possession.

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Lent is a season of repentance, a time to turn around and to begin again. In Lent we journey to the new life of Easter. The people in Los Angeles are beginning to consider how to rebuild their homes and their lives from the ashes of destruction.

Will they erect a carbon copy (no pun intended) of the original structure? Will they use fire retardant materials and greenery? Lent gives us an opportunity to rebuild, too. How might we rebuild our lives? What is out of balance, out of proportion? What is in need of change? How can we shift focus from the plastic of the car to the lives of its occupants?

We stand on the threshold of Lent today (March 5) and are invited to enter in, marked with the symbol of ashes. Perhaps today, we can take some time to consider what we might need to let go of in our lives (a possession, a habit, an attitude) and how we might want to rebuild from its ashes. Wood ash is a wonderful fertilizer and promotes new growth. Our letting go creates room for new life for ourselves and for our world.

This story appears in the **Lent** feature series. View the full series.