

Fr Prior's Homily for Ash Wednesday 2015

It is not an ecclesiastical rule, but it is certainly a tradition in many places that the ashes for Ash Wednesday are made from the palms of the previous year, collected on Palm Sunday and respectfully burnt.

Palms are a symbol of victory. On Palm Sunday, we hold them as signs of Christ's victory in His Passion and Resurrection. We keep them in our houses, on our crucifixes or near our icons. They remind us of Christ's triumph and of His glory. But even if they are made of plants which keep green a long time, they eventually fade and lose their colours. They are signs of a fragile and transient glory. We would be wrong, though, to consider that the use of linking palms and ashes, glory and death, is only a reminder that human glory is fragile and does not last. Our pride certainly needs to be reminded of such a truth, but the message goes much further. Indeed, it is not intended to teach us that glory is always eventually followed by death and corruption, but it suggests the exact contrary, namely that death is the path to glory – I mean: death with Jesus and in Jesus is the path to sharing in Jesus' glory. That is why we receive the ashes this morning with joy. The ashes remind us that we are dust and shall return to the dust. There is no way to escape death. But death is 'The End' no more. Salvation in Christ is a salvation through death, because Christ made of death the door into life eternal. That is why the ashes speak to us of the good news of the Resurrection, as we find it expressed, for instance, in Saint Paul: "you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God; you have been raised with Christ; when Christ who is our life will appear, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:1...3).

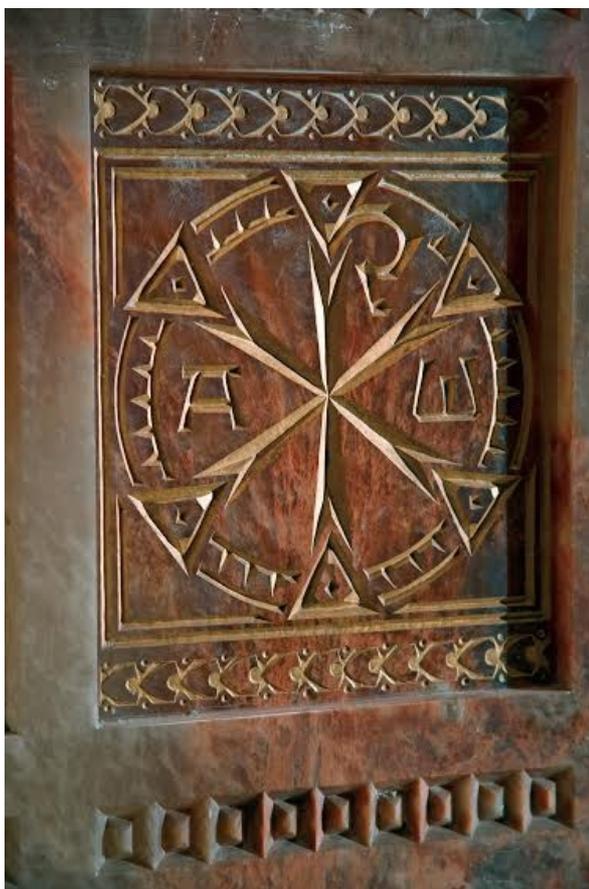
Rightly considered, these ashes entail a promise of glory because they remind us of our baptism. The ashes speak of life. In them, fire which burns leads to water which purifies and gives access to new life. Again Saint Paul: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism

into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3-4).

The ashes of our new birth from the waters of baptism and the fire of the Holy Spirit introduce us into the mystery of Lent. Indeed, Lent is about baptism. For catechumens, Lent is a time of preparation for baptism during Easter Vigil. For us who have been baptised, it is a powerful invitation to consider earnestly the mystery of which we were made partakers in baptism.

Through prayer, abstinence and generosity towards others, we shall nourish in us – and in the Church – that baptismal life, which is not other than the life of the Risen Christ which is in us His members.

Filled with this hope, let us receive the ashes with joy and with an intense spiritual desire that by sharing in the sufferings of Christ's passion and death we may become partakers also of the glory of His resurrection.



The ancient PX (Chi Rho) monogram of Christ