

Record snow forces Catholics to start Lent at home

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |





Brother Ephrem O’Brien, OSB, walks to the weather station and rain gauge northwest of the Subiaco Abbey building Feb. 15. The Benedictine monks have taken weather observations for the National Weather Service since 1897. (Brother Sebastian Richey, OSB, photo)



Ash Wednesday home kits are lined up at Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock Feb. 9. Staff members helped pack about 30 kits for people watching the Mass from home due to COVID-19, before the winter storm affected traveling to Mass. (Stacey Matchett photo)



Children from the neighborhood enjoy the grounds of St. John Center in Little Rock, home to the diocesan offices, Feb. 16. The offices were closed Feb. 16-19 because of back-to-back snowstorms in the city. (Monica Mullens photo)



Father Chandra Kodavatikanti, associate pastor at St. Joseph Church in Fayetteville, sprinkles ashes on the head of Deacon Norm DeBriyn during the noon Mass on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 17. The winter storm affected Ash Wednesday Masses. (Father Jason Tyler photo)



Valarie Edwards makes a cross of ashes on her son Micah's forehead Feb. 17, while youngest daughter Layne waits her turn. The Edwards family brought home an Ash Wednesday kit from their church, Our Lady of the Holy Souls in Little Rock. (Photo courtesy of Edwards family)



Joan Dobry walks with her brother Father Billy Kosco, visiting from the Diocese of Phoenix, the day after they walked a two-mile round trip to get to Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in North Little Rock (Marche) for Ash Wednesday Mass Feb. 17. (Photo courtesy Joan Dobry)



A frozen pipe in the ceiling of St. Bernard Church's parish hall soaked ceiling tiles in several areas and dumped water in the entrance way. Both the hall and church were damaged by burst frozen pipes during the night of Feb. 16. According to the metering system, 10,000 gallons were leaked within three hours. (Don Schmutz photo)



Volunteers from the Knights of Columbus at St. Bernard Church in Bella Vista and from Bentonville gathered Feb. 17 to clean up water from frozen pipes that flooded the church and parish hall. (Don Schmutz photo)



Maintenance worker Mike Naples clears the weight of snow off an awning at St. Edward Church in Texarkana Feb. 18 after record snowfall canceled Ash Wednesday Mass for the parish and several throughout the state. (Father William Burmester photo)



Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in North Little Rock (Marche) is seen Feb. 18 after snowstorms. (Father Ruben Quinteros photo)



At St. Mary Church in Hot Springs, Bart Newman Jr. and his son Barrett, 5, shovel snow leading to the Carroll Room Feb. 19 so St. Mary's Food Pantry could open. (Photo courtesy Bonnie Newman)



Marcos Diaz (left) and Gerardo Leon survey a small mountain of snow they helped create in the parking lot of St. Theresa Church in Little Rock Feb. 20. They are part of a group of volunteers who descended upon the church with a variety of shovels, scrapers and a Bobcat front-end loader to clear about a foot of snow from church and school sidewalks and parking lots. (Father Nelson Rubio photo)

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Snow, extreme cold leave a trail of damage to churches

Beyond cancellations caused by deep snow, the unusual cold of Arkansas' winter storms damaged several parish and school buildings.

Russellville's adult center at St. John Church had a pipe burst in the women's bathroom, flooding the center. Adult faith formation classes and Bible study classes were moved to the parish hall. St. Andrew Church in Danville also had pipes burst in the church and parish hall.

After pipes froze and burst at St. Bernard Church in Bella Vista as well as the parish hall Feb. 16, about 30 people, St. Bernard Knights of Columbus along with knights from area councils helped clean up.

"The water was gushing out the front door of the church, a quarter to a half an inch of standing water in nearly half the church," parish administrative assistant Christina Laughlin said.

Pastor Father Barnabas Maria Susai, IMS, was mopping the floor into the evening. A funeral during the week was moved into the chapel, and weekend Masses were planned to move to the parish hall where the damage was not as bad. Knights returned all week to continue the cleanup, and area businesses donated equipment to remove the water, said Bella Vista's grand knight Mike Young.

"To me it is, you've heard the old saying, that they'll know us by our deeds. So it is an amazing thing. First, our average age up there at the Bella Vista council is 74, so we had members in their 80s that were showing up, they put themselves at a health risk because of COVID," Young said. "... People just respond, and worldwide it's just innate that we respond when there's a need."

Like the churches, Catholic schools had volunteers clearing snow off parking lots and sidewalks, and some buildings sustained damage. A pipe burst at Christ the King School in Little Rock and flooded three classrooms and the library. Trinity Junior High School in Fort Smith also had several pipes burst in the school and gym, which flooded hallways and one of the locker rooms. Trinity switched to virtual learning Feb. 22 because of the damage. At St. Joseph School in Conway, a pipe to an exterior faucet burst.

Catholic High School in Little Rock was able to repair a broken water pipe and mop the entire lower level to open school Feb. 22.

Joan Dobry slipped on her Sherpa boots, heavy coat, leggings, hat, scarf and ski gloves, bundling up on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 17, for her two-mile trek in the snow to Mass with her brother, Father Billy Kosco, visiting from the Diocese of Phoenix.

She had already planned to exercise more this Lent and when her brother asked for any takers on trudging through the snow, she agreed to the two-hour round trip with snow falling and temperatures hovering at 18 degrees. To add to the Franciscan experience, the neighbor's beagle mix Daisy followed them to the church, spending part of Mass inside, then followed

them back home.

When asked why she would make that sacrifice, the 55-year-old replied, "I really felt like this was a time to connect with God out in nature when we weren't going to be interrupted by anyone or anything."

She also saw it as an opportunity to bond with her brother.

"Part of it was the whole penance of Ash Wednesday too. This is a sacrifice. We have to not only sacrifice the time it takes to get there and back, but the effort, seeing this as something we're capable of and a way to tell God, 'You are our first priority.'"

They were two of just three parishioners who were able to make it in person to Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in North Little Rock (Marche) on Ash Wednesday, along with the musician and priest.

"It was really a grace, a blessing God gave me," she said. "I don't really think it's a teaching moment for other people because they're doing what God is asking them to do. I just did it because that's what God put in front of me."

Catholics in Arkansas were preparing to enter the Lenten season as is customary with ashes, the words "from dust you came, to dust you shall return," all the more real after almost a year of loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. With mask wearing, social distancing and a new way of receiving ashes, sprinkled instead of drawn, parishes were ready. Then came the snowpocalypse, snowmageddon or just simply, an historic winter storm across the state beginning on Valentine's Day that dumped as much as 20 inches of snow in some parts of Arkansas. There were power outages, postal delays, closed businesses and wrecks, most notably a 30-mile stretch of accidents on I-40 near Lonoke. Snow continued in Central Arkansas into the early morning of Feb. 18.

For the first time in a year, Masses were canceled not for the pandemic, but for the weather. Though some parishes went forward with Ash Wednesday Masses, most were livestreamed.

"It came by surprise. I am not on the Weather Channel all the time you know, it came to us pretty early," on Sunday, said Father Mauricio Carrasco, pastor of St. John Church in Russellville, St. Augustine Church in Dardanelle and St. Andrew Church in Danville.

After finishing Sunday Mass in Dardanelle, he headed toward Danville, despite the snowfall. "One of the cars started sliding and I was like, 'Wow, this is pretty bad.' I was going like 20 miles an hour. I got there on time, thankfully, and we had Mass. It took me at least twice as long to get home on Sunday night," almost two hours instead of the typical 45 minutes.

Father Jason Tyler, pastor at St. Joseph Church in Fayetteville, held a noon Ash Wednesday Mass after he and parishioners cleared off the church steps.

"This is crazy. Totally unexpected. They forecast it, but until you see it and have to walk through it, you don't have that frame of reference," he said.

"One thing is to remember that God is with us even in all this craziness, especially in all this craziness. It's like when I preach at a funeral for someone who died tragically. The question can come up in some minds, 'How can God allow this?' ... Think about how horrible it would be

to not have God in our lives," Father Tyler said. "... Knowing that we can trust in God and rely on him should be a source of strength for us."

Some parishes moved the distribution of ashes to weekend Masses, but Father Erik Pohlmeier, pastor of Christ the King Church in Little Rock, opted for a livestream Mass, forgoing the ashes. Though there is no instruction that says ashes cannot be distributed on another day, Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection, not a penitential day, he said.

"The primary goal of the spiritual life, which we focus on especially during Lent, is surrender. Surrender to God's will, and the primary way we have to do that is to accept the things beyond our control," Father Pohlmeier said. "Every time we're given that opportunity, it gives us a chance to just surrender." He added, it's not God causing bad things to happen, "but life offers opportunity for surrender."

Outside of Easter and Christmas, despite it not being a holy day of obligation, Ash Wednesday is one of the most-attended Masses.

"We kind of have this idea that going to church is part of our Ash Wednesday, and we have to even surrender that," Father Pohlmeier said, adding it's important to contemplate the reason it's important to receive ashes. "Why do you want it? It's symbolic of the penitence of the heart and that's the more important thing. If you get ashes and don't have a change of heart, the ashes are a false sign. 'Rend your hearts, not your garments.'"

In Pocahontas and Engelberg, there were three Masses scheduled on Ash Wednesday, including for St. Paul School, all of which went to one livestream from the chapel in the rectory, celebrated by pastor Father Stephen Elser.

More than 50 people tuned in, and Father Elser said while the church itself will always be community-oriented, the pandemic and the weather have brought into focus the possibilities of reaching people where they are.

"It opened our eyes to other possibilities of how we can reach people. Adapt to where we need to be. In many ways it's been tough, but there are a lot of blessings that have come from this," he said.

Taking Church to the people was the idea when Susej Thompson began packing Ash Wednesday home kits for parishioners of Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock. Before the winter weather, the focus was on allowing those who stayed home because of the pandemic to receive ashes. About 30 kits were made, with blessed ashes, a devotional book, a letter about ash distribution and an instructional guide for properly disposing of sacramentals.

"If I had a four-wheel-drive vehicle, I'd be delivering ash kits to whoever needed them. We are so hungry, everyone is so hungry," said Thompson, faith formation and music director at the parish. "... We're trying to get the Church in all of its beautiful sacramentals and devotions into their homes and thinking about the family and how we can get these families interacting. It's very exciting, on a very sad level. The message of last year is you can't avoid what you are running from, yourself."

Living out the faith at home is the biggest lesson to draw from this Ash Wednesday, Father Carrasco said. Even though the day's Scripture readings clearly say not to make a show of penance, the Mass has been for community support.

“It’s not so much to attract attention to ourselves but to give each other strength and we’re all in this together ... We’re going to miss that and we’ve certainly missed that through COVID-19 times,” he said, adding his best advice during this Lent is to strengthen devotional life at home. “That’s certainly what’s coming to the surface this time. That’s what we’re being forced to look at. We’re, in a certain sense, being asked to fast from community.”

But fasting from community does not mean fasting from service. Several parishioners showed up to their churches with shovels in hand, including at St. Anthony Church in Weiner, St. Peter the Fisherman Church in Mountain Home and St. Theresa Church in Little Rock.

Father Norbert Rappold, pastor at St. Peter the Fisherman, drove some people to the hospital so they could see loved ones and called parishioners to check on them. At Holy Souls, the “snow angels,” parishioners who for years have come together to help when there’s a need, cleared walkways around the church Feb. 19.

When the snow is melted and one day when masks are no longer needed, Father Tyler said it’s important to remember these moments of struggle.

“When things are back to normal and when we are able to come back in person with travel conditions improving and after the pandemic, the focus should really be on being grateful to God for that opportunity to be at Mass with him,” he said.