

Hope FROM THE Ashes: A Study Guide

If you have chosen to read and reflect on *Hope from the Ashes: Insights and Resources for Welcoming Lenten Visitors* by Paul E. Jarzembowski (Paulist Press, 2022) with a small group or as a church community, this short study guide can help you get the most out of that experience.



Participants can read one or two chapters at a time – and then pause for the questions listed here. There is no single way to unpack this book. Simply use this opportunity to prayerfully reflect on what you read and allow yourself to go a little deeper along the journey.

Foreword, Preface, and Acknowledgements

1. Share some of your own past personal experiences of Ash Wednesday and Lent.
2. When you think of the word “ashes,” what immediately comes to mind for you?
3. For whom or for what are you most grateful as you reflect on your own Lenten experiences?

Chapter 1: The Lenten Phenomenon

This chapter unpacks the centuries-old reality that churches experience large crowds and increased engagement on Ash Wednesday and throughout the season of Lent, leading up to Easter.

1. What have you personally noticed about the influx of people on Ash Wednesday?
2. Respond to the “what if” questions on page 7, from the perspective of your community.
3. Why do you think ashes and Lent have been so resilient throughout human history?
4. Since ashes and Lent are common to several Christian traditions and around the world, how are you challenged or encouraged to think more ecumenically or globally?

Chapter 2: Stepping Up to the Challenge

This chapter offers some reasons why people reconnect in Lent and how we can respond accordingly.

1. Which of the seven common threads (from pages 23 to 38) resonate most for you personally?
2. Can you name someone who might connect with each of the seven common threads?
3. What response would a visitor to your community typically receive on Ash Wednesday?
4. Reflecting on “An Ash Wednesday Challenge” (from pages 40 to 45), how do you concretize the concepts of *boundless hospitality*, *radical warmth*, and *unconditional compassion*?

Chapter 3: Preparing for a Moment of Return

This chapter looks at how communities can prepare for welcoming guests on Ash Wednesday and in Lent.

1. How can you spiritually prepare yourself to avoid feeling frustrated or angry when those who are not as active in their practice of faith come momentarily to receive ashes in Lent?
2. What more do you or your community need to learn about evangelization and Lenten visitors?
3. Who will you invite to join you for Ash Wednesday or other moments this coming Lent?
4. Which of the practical ideas listed within this chapter do you hope to start first?

Chapter 4: The Ash Wednesday Experience

This chapter explores some ways to make newcomers and visitors feel welcome on Ash Wednesday.

1. Leading up to and during Ash Wednesday, how can your digital presence be an extension of Lenten hospitality, warmth, and compassion that we are called to offer to others?
2. When newcomers or visitors arrive on Ash Wednesday, how can you personally or how can people from your faith community treat them like a welcome guest?
3. During the Ash Wednesday service or liturgy, how can you or how can your faith community help newcomers or visitors better understand what is happening?
4. What one thing can you or your faith community do *after* the imposition of ashes or the Ash Wednesday liturgy – to extend the moment of return just a little bit longer?
5. Which of the practical ideas listed within this chapter do you hope to start first?

Chapter 5: The Lenten Journey

This chapter offers suggestions for what individuals and communities can do for newcomers and others unfamiliar with the practice of faith throughout the Lenten season.

1. How can Lent become a type of “spring training” for building up your relationships with others, especially with those on the margins of society and the peripheries of our faith communities?
2. On Lenten Fridays, how can you better engage those less active in the practice of their faith?
3. Throughout Lent, what can you do to be more pastorally aware and responsive to others?
4. What elements of Holy Week and Easter might connect with those who are less active in faith?
5. Which of the practical ideas listed within this chapter do you hope to start first?

Chapter 6: Beyond the Ashes

This chapter explores ways on how each of us can be better responsive to moments of return all year long.

1. What are other “moments of return” throughout the year when we get to encounter others, especially those less active in their faith tradition, through our Christian tradition?
2. What lessons do Ash Wednesday and Lent offer us that we can apply at any time of year?
3. Which of the seven lessons on how we can be more pastorally responsive (listed on pages 154 to 173) might be the greatest challenge for you?
4. How can you help people know that they truly belong to your faith community?

Chapter 7: Persevering Hope

This chapter concludes with a reflection on the hope, perseverance, and patience we need for the journey.

1. Share your biggest fears and concerns with trying something new this Lent. Are you worried about being able to engage with others? Do you feel like this could all be a futile effort?
2. What are your biggest hopes and dreams for what these potential Lenten efforts could yield?
3. Which of the many ideas listed throughout the book are you considering doing first?
4. What support, resources, or collaborations do you need to move forward in hope?

Before concluding your study, take a moment for quiet prayer, asking God to give you the strength you need to persevere, the wisdom to know what is best, and the love to share with those you have yet to meet.