The practice of applying ashes as a sign of sincere repentance goes back thousands of years. Frequently in the days of the Old and the New Testament, when someone had sinned, they cloth their body with sackcloth and covered themselves with ashes.

The sacramental that we are use today arises from that custom, the spiritual practice of observing public penitence.

Church history tells us that the practice of applying ashes on one's forehead during the Lenten Season goes back as far as the eight century. This was accompanied by different forms of fasting, prayer, sacrifices, charity towards others, etc... St. Leo, around 461 A.D., tell us that during the Lenten Season, the faithful abstain from certain food to fulfill with their fasts the Apostolic institution of forty days.
In the days of the Old Testament, many tore their clothing as a sign of repentance. But, while some tore their clothing, (this was an exterior sign); there was no true repentance. Their hearts of stone had not changed!

They had not let go of their worldly ways to embrace holy ways.

To practice sincere repentance, the Lord God tells us to change our hearts. We are called to examine our most inner self, those evil ways that we have to let go, once and for always.

Jesus warns us against hypocrisy, those who are pious so they may be seen by others. But tomorrow, the ashes will have been washed off, they will have disappeared. The public evidence of your Lenten practice will have been washed away. During Lent, our piety must evidence private time between the Lord God and ourselves. We must experience a transformation of our whole being beyond going to Church. We must
walk with Christ in our lives every minute of the day, from the time we rise in the morning until the time we go to bed at night. And Jesus had much to tell his disciples (that includes us) about how to mark the 40-day marathon that stretches out before us.

When you sacrifice by giving to the Church or by reaching out to someone in need, your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing. Do it privately and then forget about it. If you make a larger contribution to the Church so you can receive a larger Tax Deductible Receipt at the end of the calendar year, then your right hand knows what your left hand is doing. Your right hand is giving and your left hand is waiting to receive its benefit.

If you decide to increase your time of prayer during the Lenten Season, do not do it at the Church on Saturday or Sundays before Mass so others will see you. In such a manner, you will receive your reward on earth by those who will praise you for your piety. Rather, go into your bedroom, close the door and pray to God the Father in private so the Heavenly
Father may see you in private and reward you accordingly.

If you decide to fast, do not overdo it to the extent that you look weak and sick so the others will notice that you are fasting. Fast to the degree that you can manage, always being cheerful and looking healthy so no one but God will know that you are fasting. Then, God the Father will reward you. And all of these are to be secret. Secrecy seems to be key because it reveals our true motive. Do we want everyone to find ashes on our foreheads all during Lent? Do we want to impress our friends with our resolve? Do we want a gold medal in the Lenten marathon? The Gospel says that medal, that admiration, will be our only reward.

So Jesus instructs his disciples to keep a secret Lent: stealthy kindnesses and sneaky generosity, silent prayer and a fast that you don’t talk about.

It’s the Nike challenge of the New Testament: Just do it!