

Ash Wednesday

Here are some prayers & information for Ash Wednesday & the beginning of the Lenten season

Questions people ask



- What is Ash Wednesday?

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, the 40-day period of fasting before Easter.

On Ash Wednesday, ashes are blessed, mixed with either holy oil or water, and marked on our forehead with the sign of the cross. As he signs us with the blessed ashes, our priest prays: "remember you are dust, and to dust you will return" (see Genesis 3:19), or "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). The ashes we

use on Ash Wednesday come from the burning of palm branches that were blessed the previous year on Palm Sunday.

The ashes serve two purposes. First, they remind us of our mortality and humanity as we begin the Lenten Fast. Second, ashes are a biblical symbol of repentance, sorrow, and humility. There are many cases in the Scriptures of wearing ashes as a sign of penitence, often while wearing sackcloth. The prophet Jeremiah (6:26) urges his readers to "gird on sackcloth and roll in ashes."

Fasting is an important part of Ash Wednesday, and Ash Wednesday is an official fast day of the Church, along with Good Friday. Fasting has always been important in our faith. It was while "worshipping the Lord and fasting" that the Holy Spirit led the Apostles to set apart Paul and Barnabas for their work (Act 13). The history of the Church is filled with stories of fasting and its spiritual value. Jesus warns us not to show off about fasting however, and Ash Wednesday fasting is about repentance

- What are the guidelines for fasting & abstinence?

The *minimum* the Catholic Church expects is fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and abstinence on the Fridays of Lent.

Prayers

- *From the Collect on Ash Wednesday:*

Father in Heaven, Protect us in our struggle against evil. As we begin the discipline of Lent, make this season holy by our self-denial.

- *From the Anglican Ash Wednesday Collect:*

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness.

- *The Jesus prayer:*

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Fasting means eating only one full meatless meal on that day. However, one may still eat a breakfast and even a lunch in addition to a full meal *if the two additional small meals do not add up to a second full meal*. Snacking is not allowed. Drinking coffee, tea, juices, etc, between meals is permitted on fast days.

Abstinence requires abstaining from meat, and soups and gravies made from meat, for the entire day. Meat is defined as the "flesh meat of warm-blooded animals." This is the reason why Catholics often eat fish on Fridays, but anything meatless works. The requirements are slightly different for those of certain ages. Fasting is only required of those from ages 18-59, and abstinence is required of all people 14 and older, although parents are expected to teach their children the reasons behind their fasting, etc. Those with health conditions are excluded.

- Is it always food that we fast from? What else might we do?

Here are some other ideas for a Lenten discipline. Remember that Lent is about spiritual transformation and conversion, and is basically a spiritual training period. Through our Lenten disciplines and prayer, we become more like Jesus and grow closer to God. One way we focus on Christ, and not on material goods, is to make sacrifices during Lent. For instance, watching television is not sinful in itself, but since most people enjoy it, giving it up for 40 days is a sacrifice

Sacrifices: Coffee, Computer Use, Alcohol, Driving everywhere, Eating Out, Gossiping, Internet Chatting, Meat/Red Meat, Smoking, Swearing, Sweets, Sugar, Television, Using Credit Cards, etc.

Additions: Adding More Prayer Time, Giving Away More Money and Time, Reading More Scripture, Studying More, Going to Confession weekly, Daily Mass, etc.

Restrictions and additions often overlap. For instance, some people give up swearing for Lent, but when they accidentally *do* swear, they put money in a jar (50 cents to a dollar usually). Not only does this discourage future swearing, the money in the jar can be given to charity at the end of Lent. These are just a few suggestions on how to fast during Lent. Think of some your own! One person's fast is not always appropriate for another.