

Lesson 19: Lent

Please click twice to watch the video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJBMw2pQZiA>

What Is Ash Wednesday?

- On this first day of Lent, Christians attend liturgical activities and receive ashes on our foreheads in the form of a cross, signaling a sign of our faith and a reminder of remorse for our sins. We are told “*Repent and believe in the gospel,*” when we receive the ashes.
- With these ashes, we recall our origins from the earth, as well as how our bodies shall return one day to the same form “*Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return*”).
- In true fashion of life coming full circle, the ashes are produced from the burning of palm fronds of the preceding year’s Palm Sunday, which comes the week before Easter Sunday and marks the welcome Jesus received from followers upon his return to Jerusalem prior to his crucifixion.

What Is Lent?

- With ashes administered, we now begin Lent, a period of forty days (Sundays are excluded) that commemorates the time Jesus spent in the desert prior to beginning his public ministry as Messiah.
- As described in the gospel readings according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, following his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert, where he fasted for forty days and was subject to temptation by Satan.
- To honor this sacrifice and conquest over the devil, Catholics elect to set aside the season of Lent to refocus on Jesus as we look ahead to his death on the Cross and rejoice over his miraculous return.

What Do We Do during Lent?

- Lent is a time when participants can carry out a three-fold mission: fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. Certainly, these components are not new within our Catholic teachings nor are they reserved only for Lent, as we are encouraged to practice them regularly throughout the year. However, a special and renewed focus on each of them during Lent can foster growth and appreciation within our collective faith and respective spiritual journeys.

Prayer

- Another avenue for self-growth during Lent that can lead to closer relationship with God is prayer.
- While talking with God is a practice Catholics and all Christians should conduct regularly no matter what point in the year, Lent presents us with an especially meaningful time to connect with our Lord and nurture our bond.

- We can strengthen our relationship with God through deeper and more frequent prayer activity, such as Scripture readings before beginning our daily morning routine, or praying at mealtimes, commuting to work or school, or during nature walks and other such exercises.
- Lent can also provide us a chance to pray in ways beyond simply asking things from God for ourselves. Praising him for His glory and wonder, acknowledging and thanking Him for our many blessings and calling on God to intercede and aid in the lives of others are all examples of how we can appreciate God’s presence and works.

Fasting

- As Jesus fasted in the desert for forty days, we, too, are called to forgo something for the same period when observing Lent. It is during this time we can deepen our awareness of his sacrifice on the Cross, as well as Jesus’ daily forgiveness of our sins and unconditional love for us.
- It should be noted, however, this personal sacrifice should be difficult but healthy, while respecting responsibilities.
- For instance, giving up coffee for Lent takes little to no effort if one rarely or never drinks it. Along the same lines, going without something you enjoy regularly—like Netflix, if you watch it often—may seem like an impossible task, but is a small price to pay for a step closer to eternal salvation. A student electing not to do any homework for the Lenten weeks ignores his or her academic obligations and can suffer harmful ramifications.
- During Lent, Catholics participants are given a reprieve on Sundays as a “mini-Easter,” allowing us to break our temptation. Again, though, this is not designed to allow or condone taking part in any inappropriate behavior, such as beating up a sibling or driving a vehicle while under the influence.

Almsgiving

- Stressing the importance of recognizing those in need while demonstrating the model of selflessness that Jesus embodied on earth, Lent offers us an opportunity to further concentrate on displaying acts of charity within our communities.
- Whether it be through the giving of time, money, clothing or food, volunteer service provides us a perfect occasion to improve society by living out Jesus’ teaching of helping him through helping his people.
- Such offerings remind us of the valuable need to remain disciplined and prudent regarding our own desires in life, as well as the standard set in order to be welcomed into God’s Kingdom

Symbols of Lent

- **Ashes:** They remind us of the creation story that we are made from dust (Gen 2:7). They symbolize our human mortality and need for forgiveness, humility, purification and sorrow for our sins. Similarly, the ashes remind us that we are vulnerable persons before God and as it is written in Gen (3:19) that, ‘we are dust and unto dust we shall return.’
- **Violet/purple** is the liturgical color for the season of Lent, as well as the color of the stole worn by the priest for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Violet is a somber color which symbolizes mourning, suffering, humility, regret, and the willingness to do penance, particularly fasting. Violet’s association with suffering is based upon Jesus’ Passion when the soldiers clothed him in a purple cloak and tortured him (Mk 15:17-20; Jn 19:2-3).
- **Stones:** They remind us of Jesus’ experience in the desert for forty days and being tempted by the devil. Jesus was tempted by the devil to change stones into bread but he did not heed to the devil. He remained steadfast and overcame the temptations. The stones symbolize a desolation, misery and sadness
- **Incense:** It is a symbol of prayer, and as it is written in Ps (141:2) that ‘Let my prayer come like incense before you.’
- **Fish:** It is a symbol of lent which calls us to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. It further reminds us of abstinence from meat on all the Fridays of Lenten season.
- **Praying Hands.** Praying hands represent prayer, the activity that ranks first among the other three traditional penitential practices: fasting, almsgiving, and works of charity. Prayer is the premier way to strengthen one’s relationship with God, and in so doing, to turn away from sin.
- **The Money Bag** symbolizes the Lenten penitential practice of almsgiving; money put into the bag is then donated to the poor.
- **Thorns:** It reminds us of physical suffering, loneliness and injustices in the world.
- **Cross:** It symbolizes victory over death and salvation from sin.
- **The Stations of the Cross:** Also known as The Way of the Cross, this ritual offers the chance to think about the crucifixion of Jesus. Each station is an opportunity to think about the pain and suffering Jesus went through because God loves us. The stations typically are prayed every Friday evening during Lent except on Good Friday, when the Stations of the Cross traditionally are prayed at 3 p.m.
- **The Palm Branches** symbolize Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The branches remind Catholics that there are both triumphs and defeats in life but that if they maintain their friendship with God, they will ultimately triumph.

- **The Easter Egg** became a symbol of the rock tomb out of which Jesus emerged to new life in the Resurrection.

So while Lent may seem demanding and perhaps uncomfortable, its purpose is definitely not to cause us pain. During this important season, we are given an opportunity for self-examination in order to better discover both our identity as children of God and the beautiful relationship with the Lord that can flow from that.

