



ASH WEDNESDAY AND LENT FREQUENT QUESTIONS



Q. Is Ash Wednesday a holy day of obligation?

A. Ash Wednesday **is not** a holy day of obligation, but it marks the beginning of the Lenten season. The day is chosen based on the fact that it's 40 days before Good Friday. It is, however, a day of fast and abstinence.

Q. Why do we receive ashes on Ash Wednesday?

A. One of the prayers that can be said as ashes are given explains it very well. The words are a reminder of our origins, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

The ashes and the whole season of Lent are a time to refocus on our relationship with God and that relationship starts with a dependence on God for our very existence.

To recall that only with the breath of God can we have life is motivation to reorder whatever part of life needs it. As God breathed life into the dust at the beginning he can breathe new life into those who have fallen into sin. The ashes are a sign of mortality and a sign of renewal in Christ.

Q. What are the rules about fasting, abstinence?

A. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of fast and abstinence. The law of fasting allows one full meal and two smaller ones. The law of abstinence prohibits the eating of meat.

Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence in the United States. The obligation of abstinence begins at age 14. The law of fasting obliges all between the ages of 18-59.

Pastors and parents are to see to it that minors, though not bound by the law of fast and abstinence, are educated in the authentic sense of penance and encouraged to do acts of penance suitable to their age.

All members of the Christian faithful are encouraged to do acts of penance and charity beyond what is prescribed by the law.

Q. Are Sundays part of Lent?

A. Sundays most definitely are a part of Lent as they are listed the first through fifth Sundays of Lent, and not of something else. The Sundays do, however, take on a different character than other days because Sunday is always a celebration of the resurrection.

There is no rule on whether Lenten practices continue on Sundays since such practices are voluntary anyway. Without a doubt we should maintain our preparation for the Triduum on Sundays, whether or not that includes acts of penance.

Q. Why should we perform acts of penance?

A. The primary reason is that we take Christ as our model and he himself undertook acts of penance in preparation for his ministry and before his passion.

Acts of penance are theological in following the example of the Master. They are also practical in helping to accomplish goals of certain days and seasons. In particular Lent is a season to reorder priorities and penance helps to be sure that created things are subordinate to divine realities in our lives. As it says in the Church's documents "Penance is a religious, personal act which has as its aim love and surrender to God" (*Paenitemini*" chapter 1).

Of course Scripture is clear as well that the rending of our hearts is the sacrifice the Lord desires. The various acts of penance put into physical reality what should be happening in our hearts. Of course, in the season of Lent it all works together to prepare for the passion of our Lord that will lead to resurrection.

Q. When we abstain, what does that include?

A. All Catholics 14 years of age and older are to abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and each Friday of Lent. This is an act of penance in keeping with the Lenten season and Fridays are given special attention because it is the day of our Lord's death.

In fact each Friday of the year retains a penitential character according to Church rules and some form of penance, such as abstaining from meat, should be practiced year round. The rule of abstinence from meat includes all flesh and organs from mammals and fowl. This also includes soups and gravies made from them.

By-products such as eggs and cheese are permitted. Fish and other cold-blooded animals have traditionally been the acceptable substitutes on days of abstinence.

Q. Why can't we eat meat on Fridays?

A. This practice is one of the disciplines of Lent that has the goal of love and surrender to God. It requires a break in the normal routine of our day and serves as a reminder that the basic needs of life should point us to the goodness of God.

Scripture has a long record of abstaining from certain foods as part of religious practice. In our day that practice continues, not because eating meat is bad, but as a discipline to turn the mind more consciously to God.

Q. Why we do not sing “alleluia” during Lent?

A. There are several reasons. One of them is to “fast” of this joyful acclamation, so it can resound more loudly during Easter.

We can also say that this is a kind of exile. While the event of the resurrection has occurred in history, the days of Lent serve as a reminder that we do not yet experience the kingdom in its fullness. We live in the hope of the resurrection, but the weakness of human existence is all too evident in this life.

The omission of the alleluia is one symbolic way to enter into the spirit of the season of Lent. The days of Lent are days of penance and recollection of human weakness but also days of anticipation and so we long for the day when the kingdom is fully realized. To be deprived of certain things during the days of Lent is designed to create a longing for the realization of all that the life of Jesus promises.

Q. What is the significance of the color purple during Lent?

A. The color purple is an additional symbol of penance. The Scriptures tell us that a purple garment was placed on Jesus during his passion as a mockery. It is fitting that the color be maintained during the days in which we focus on our own reality of sin that continues to be a mockery of the love and goodness of God.

The color purple and the days of penance themselves will eventually give way to the color white and celebration of Christ’s victory over sin. In humility we acknowledge our sin in penance so that we may share fully in the celebration to come.

Q. What determines the date of Easter or when Lent begins?

A. The Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) set the date of Easter as the Sunday following the 14th day of the paschal full moon, which is the full moon whose 14th day falls on or after the vernal (spring) equinox. The reason was because that was the date of Passover in the Jewish calendar, and the Last Supper (Holy Thursday) occurred on the Passover. Therefore, Easter was the Sunday after Passover.

