

Ash Wednesday – The Journey to Lent

Ash Wednesday is one of the most popular and important holy days in the liturgical calendar. It is the day many Christians mark as the first day of Lent; the 40-day period of reflection, fasting, abstinence, and penitence leading up to Easter Sunday, reminding us that God is gracious and merciful. This year we mark Ash Wednesday on Wednesday, February the 14th.

Ash Wednesday comes from the ancient Jewish tradition of penance and fasting which includes the wearing of ashes on the forehead; ashes made from the blessed palms used in the Palm Sunday celebration of the previous year – they are burned, christened with Holy Water, and scented by exposure to incense.

Historically, the distribution of ashes comes from a ceremony of ages past. Christians who had committed grave faults performed public penance, and on Ash Wednesday, the Bishop blessed the hair shirts which they were to wear during the forty days of penance, and sprinkled over them ashes made from the palms of the previous year. Then, while the faithful recited the Seven Penitential Psalms, the penitents were turned out of the church because of their sins and they did not enter the church again until Holy Thursday after having won reconciliation by their forty days of penance. In time, all Christians came to receive ashes out of devotion.

In his Lenten message from last year, the Pope wrote that Lent is the favorable season for renewing our encounter with Christ, living in his word, in the sacraments, and in our neighbor. “A right relationship with people consists in gratefully recognizing their value. Even the poor person at the door is not a nuisance, but a summons to conversion and to change. In this way, Lent is a particularly fitting time to open our door to all those in need. Each life that we encounter is a gift deserving acceptance, respect and love. Indifference to our neighbor and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians. Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience.” Describing this phenomenon he called the *globalization of indifference*, Francis continued: “whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. We end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own. But when we fast from this indifference, we can begin to feast on love. In fact, Lent is the perfect time to learn how to love again. Jesus—the great protagonist of this holy season—certainly showed us the way. In him, God descends all the way down to bring everyone up. In his life and his ministry, no one is excluded.”

As we start the journey of Lent, with its emphasis on fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, we have an opportunity at a new beginning in our own lives. As the Pope affirmed, this season urgently calls us to conversion. We are asked to return to God with all our hearts, to refuse to settle for mediocrity, and to grow in friendship with the Lord. During this Lenten Season, let us pray for one another so that, by sharing in the victory of Christ, we too may open our doors to the weak and to the poor.

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