

Did you know . . .

Lent Begins

Lent begins this week on Ash Wednesday, March 6. The Lenten season of forty days represent the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, enduring the temptation of Satan and preparing to begin His ministry. The word Lent comes from the Anglo Saxon word *lencten*, which means spring.

Lent is a time of repentance, fasting and preparation for the coming of Easter. It is a time of self-examination and reflection. The focus of Lent is baptism: preparation for baptism and for renewing baptismal commitment. “Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has reemphasized the baptismal character of Lent, especially through the restoration of the Catechumenate and its Lenten rituals.” [Catholic Doors Ministry].

Following the example of the Ninevites who did penance in sackcloth and ashes, our foreheads are marked with ashes in the sign of the cross to remind us that life on earth is temporary. “Ashes are a symbol of penance made sacramental by the blessing of the Church...” They help us to develop a spirit of humility and sacrifice.

“The distribution of ashes comes from a ceremony of ages past. Christians who had committed grave faults performed public penance. 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 from the previous year. Then, while the faithful recited the Seven Penitential Psalms, the penitents were turned out of the church because of their sins -- just as Adam, the first man, was turned out of Paradise because of his disobedience. The penitents did not enter the church again until Maundy Thursday after having won reconciliation by the toil of forty days' penance and sacramental absolution. Later, all Christians, whether public or secret penitents, came to receive ashes out of devotion. In earlier times, the distribution of ashes was followed by a penitential procession.” [Shrine of the most Blessed Sacrament, Hanceville, AL]

The ashes, made from the blessed palms from last year's Palm Sunday celebration, are christened with Holy Water and are scented by exposure to incense. They not only symbolize penance and contrition, they are also a reminder that God is gracious and merciful to those who call on Him with repentant hearts. “His Divine mercy is of utmost importance during the season of Lent, and the Church calls on us to seek that mercy during the entire Lenten season with reflection, prayer and penance.”

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