

TIMELY TOPICS



DIOCESE OF COLUMBUS, OFFICE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND CATECHESIS

Lenten Symbols, Rituals, and Customs

Beginning with this issue, we will present in several parts some of the symbols of this season. Many of these signs and symbols are familiar to us; but some of their origins and meanings may surprise us!

Abstinence refers to not eating meat, poultry or soups and sauces made from meat or poultry. From the first century, abstinence traditionally has been observed as a way to honor Christ who sacrificed his flesh on a Friday. Abstinence, along with fasting, is mandatory on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Abstinence alone is observed on all Fridays of Lent.

Fasting is a form of silent, continuous prayer that expresses the weakness of humans and the mercy of God.

Ashes are a symbol of repentance and a reminder that from dust we came and to dust we return. Among the early Israelites ashes from burnt offerings were sprinkled over unclean persons /sinners (Numbers 19:17-18). In the early church, branches used on Palm Sunday were burned and the ashes were used to mark sinners and criminals. Out of sympathy, family and friends of these 'marked' persons began using the ashes also. Today we, too, are "marked" with the sign of Christ on Ash Wednesday.

Purple is the color of sorrow, penitence and royal dignity. Liturgical vestments worn by the priest and the altar cloths used for Mass during Lent are purple with minimal decoration. Purple is the liturgical color for both Advent and Lent. Lent's hue is more red-purple while Advent's hue is blue-purple.

Rose is the color symbolic of anticipatory joy during a time of penance. It is worn on *Laetare* Sunday (third Sunday of Lent) and *Gaudate* Sunday

(third Sunday of Advent). Both Latin terms refer to rejoicing.

Fasting is a form of penance in reparation for our sins. The Church obliges us to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. All persons over 18 and under 59 years of age must fast, unless their health or circumstances would prohibit it, e.g., a nursing mother, the ill, a construction worker. On a fast day, one may have only one full meal, and two smaller meals that do not equal the main meal. Meat may be eaten except on days of abstinence (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday). Eating between meals is not permitted; but liquids, including milk and fruit juices, may be taken at any time. Fasting is a form of silent, continuous prayer that expresses the weakness of humans and the mercy of God.

Forty Days is the length of Lent, symbolic of the length of time Jesus spent in the desert praying and fasting. It is a time of preparing for the feast of Easter and journeying with those to be baptized at the Easter Vigil.

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The Pretzel is a traditional Lenten food. Christians in the Roman Empire kept a very strict fast all through Lent: no milk, butter, cheese, eggs, cream or meat. They made small breads of water, flour and salt to remind themselves that Lent was a time of prayer. These breads were shaped in the form of two arms crossed over the front of the body in a traditional posture of prayer. They called the breads "little arms" (*bracellae*). The Germanic people later changed the Latin to *brezel* or *prezel* which in English became *pretzel*. Today's pretzel still shows the form of arms crossed in prayer, reminding us of its origins. Pretzels today still consist only of water, flour and salt, thus proclaiming Lent as a time of fasting and of prayer.✂



Ideas for every age

Adapt for a staff/team in-service, the classroom, or RCIA:

1. Present a bowl of pretzels
2. Explain the origin of the "holy pretzel" and its significance
3. Pray the "pretzel prayer" (see below, "Ceremony of the Pretzel")
4. Ask and discuss:
 - How do I pray during Lent?
 - How could I increase or enhance my prayer life during Lent?
 - We often "give up" or fast from something for Lent. How can I turn that around and make it an action that helps others? For example, I give up chocolate and put the money I saved into a Rice Bowl.

Families: Ceremony of the Pretzel

1. On Ash Wednesday, a parent may explain the origin of the "holy pretzel," so that the children will understand its significance.
2. The pretzel might be served on each plate for each evening meal until Easter.
3. The following "pretzel prayer" may be added to the grace before meals

PRAYER

We beg you, O Lord, to bless these breads which are to remind us that Lent is a sacred season of penance and prayer. Grant us, we pray, that we, too, may be reminded by the daily sight of these pretzels to observe the holy season of Lent with true devotion and great spiritual fruit. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

(With ecclesiastical approbation).

Activity Source: *Pretzels for God* by Unknown, Pretzels for God, St. Francis Xavier Church, 4715 N. Central, Phoenix, AZ 85012

Correlation to Certification Standards & the Graded Course of Study

Religion Graded Course of Study

Content Standard II-C:

Describe Jesus Christ as our Savior who redeemed us by his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers

Standard 3, Catholic Theology:

3.2.2 Describe the meanings and message of the paschal mystery.

3.4.1 Explain basic liturgical principles, the liturgical year . . . the devotional and sacramental life of the church, and components of liturgical celebrations.

The Six Tasks of Catechesis

Knowledge of the Faith:

“ . . . by deepening knowledge of the faith, catechesis nourishes not only the life of faith but equips it to explain itself to the world . . . ”

Liturgical Education

“ . . . catechesis, along with promoting a knowledge of the liturgy and the sacraments, must also educate the disciples of Jesus Christ for prayer . . . ”

Teaching to Pray

“ . . . when catechesis is permeated by a climate of prayer, the assimilation of the entire Christian life reaches its summit . . . ”

Resources

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