



## **BEGINNING THE CHALLENGE OF LENT**

Ash Wednesday is a very important day in the life of the Church because this is the official beginning of Lent. On that day, we receive ashes during the Mass.

The ashes are blessed and imposed on the penitents brow. These are ashes that come from the palms and branches blessed on Palm Sunday last year. These palms and branches are symbols of our faith in Christ, to whom we renew our baptismal promises during the Easter Vigil celebration. But now these palms and branches are dry, brown and unpleasant to look at which symbolize our souls that for the past months are soiled again by our imperfections, disloyalty and sins.



The Church receives this expressive rite of the imposition of ashes from an ancient Jewish tradition. For the Jews pouring ashes on the head was a sign of public sorrow and repentance. Therefore, this rite is not a private affair. It is a community act. It means that we are now showing publicly our firm commitment to perform acts of penance and refrain from committing sin during this day and throughout the forty days of the Lenten Season. It is a terrible shame if we come to church to receive ashes and yet we do not take advantage of the special opportunity the Church gives us during Lent to really prepare ourselves for Easter.

Ash Wednesday is also a joyful celebration of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and this is mixed with the sadness of our recognition that we are not worthy to have Jesus enter our souls. But God gives us another chance to return to Him, to return to the beauty and innocence of our baptism. Upon receiving the ashes, the priest and other ministers say: "Turn away from sin and be



faithful to the gospel.” With these words Jesus gives us the guide to reach the goal of this season which is repentance, conversion and faithfulness to His word. We hear the word ‘conversion’ a lot and conversion is another way of saying, ‘turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel.’ It really means to reverse our course, to change and to transform ourselves truly and sincerely. It really means to turn our eyes towards God and follow Him with courage and determination.

There are some basic ancient practices of Lent and are mentioned by our gospel today that may help us, like: prayer, fasting, almsgiving or works of mercy. These three practices make us reach out to God as well as to our neighbour. Our Christian life is characterized by these three things together every day of the year:



First is the most obvious one, **prayer**. As friends, we should do things together like: be in each other’s presence and talk. The same applies in our friendship with God. For sure, the most important is what we are doing now, we participate in the Mass. It is the greatest prayer because it renews Jesus’ sacrifice which opens heaven to us. But our participation in the

Mass should be complemented by being alone with God after the Mass which is away from the community or from people to be with Him. The place could be before the Blessed Sacrament in the Adoration on a Friday morning and then read a good spiritual book which will help us focus on God, pray the rosary or take a walk asking the Lord to accompany us. If there are no other places to be alone and commune with God, the toilet is a good place. I’m sure no one is going to disturb us but let us be sure that nobody wants to use it anymore or else a long line is formed outside the door. But please don’t do it for show so that people will not think what a spiritual person we are but to grow in our friendship with Jesus.



Second is **fasting**. Ash Wednesday is a day of fasting and abstinence. Every generation of Christians fasted until about 1960. We need to return to this practice. At a very minimum we must follow the rules of fasting and abstinence during this day. And so therefore, there is no meat today and the next seven Fridays of Lent. Fasting is giving up some favourite food or eating less. Fasting is also to let go of the things that we enjoy. It is to let go of the things that are pleasing to our senses and pleasing to the taste. This

reminds us that if we are going to get to heaven we must deny immediate impulses, take up our cross and follow Jesus.



Third is **almsgiving**. Fasting is not good at all times. Fasting only becomes good always when it is accompanied by this third practice, almsgiving. In other words, the food that we will not eat today let us give it to somebody who is poor and hungry. This is the way of fasting. But personally, I honestly do not give immediately to every person who shows up and ask for help. I want to be a good steward by using resources to best help others. I do it mainly through charitable institutions that help as best as they can, the needy people. St. John Chrysostom said that after we have satisfied our own basic needs and of those we are directly responsible for, all the rest belongs to the poor. Lent is time to look at the things we spend our money on. Lent is a good time to get rid of some of the clutters in one's room and of one's life.

We receive each one of us a black cross on our foreheads. It reminds us that soon we will return to dust. And Lent calls us back to basics: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Let us turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel. How do we want to use this allotted time for God?

When Lent begins we often ask each other "What have you given up for Lent?", and the answer is something like Smoking, chocolate, sweets, biscuits, alcohol, swearing."

We need to be more positive and ask "What are you going to do extra for Lent?" The answers might be "Drive more carefully, take more exercise, eat less, be more helpful about the house, drink more moderately, be kinder and look for the good in everyone, try to come to Mass during the week, remember my prayers and try to say a grace or a "thankyou" to God before and after means."

The idea of Lent is to try and get rid of any bad habits we have picked up over the years and try to encourage good ones in our lives. We try to get rid of some of the burdens that weigh us down and set ourselves to become much freer.

Do you remember a few years ago, there was a trend called "Feng shui", which comes from Eastern mysticism, whereby we try to get rid of the clutter, the rubbish and garbage in our lives and our living space so that we can become lighter and move more easily. This is what Lent asks of us, too. So, let us be positive.



So, for example, when we come into church we should dip our fingers in the Holy Water stoup and bless ourselves with the sign of the cross; this reminds us that when we were baptised we became children of God. Let us do this thoughtfully and carefully.



And before we go into our benches let us genuflect reverently and bow our heads towards the Tabernacle. (Genuflecting is not possible for us all, but we can all bow reverently towards the altar.) These simple gestures speak volumes about our attitude. We are acknowledging that we are in the presence of the King of Kings.

We might also spend a few moments looking over the Scripture readings, readying ourselves to listen attentively to the Word of God, so that when the Word is proclaimed we will have a better understanding of it.

All very simple, but eminently do-able. Such small matters will help us make Lent a positive and productive time for us all.

