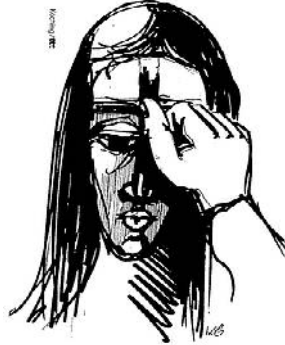


# ASH WEDNESDAY



## PRAYER:

I pray that on this Ash Wednesday  
my small sacrifices in fasting be a way  
to clear out the clutter of my life and  
to see you more clearly.

May my longing for meat and other food  
help me to focus my life more outside of me.  
Let me be aware of those who suffer around me.  
Make me aware of them as brothers and sisters  
you have placed in my life.

May I acknowledge to you my sins today,  
and my deep need for your loving forgiveness,  
grace, and transforming Spirit.  
Help me to make a good Lent!



Central to Christian belief is the great feast of Easter, when we celebrate that the risen Christ overcomes the bonds of sin and death and enters into the glory of God. By baptism, Christ offers the same opportunity to his faithful. Lent prepares us to participate fully in these Easter mysteries and to renew our baptismal commitment.

Ash Wednesday begins Lent, a formal forty day period of prayer and repentance, leading up to the Easter celebrations. We become more aware of our own sins, and how we share in the sin of the world, how much we need Jesus to save us. It is a time of fasting, prayer, penance and alms giving. We should try to distance ourselves from noise, parties, and other activities that would distract us from this reflective season. We try to become the Christians that we should be, conscious of the need to give good example to the catechumens who will be baptized into the Church on Holy Saturday.



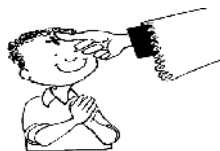
On this day the faithful who will observe Lent come forward to be marked with ashes on the forehead, a visible sign of penance for our sins and the sins of the world. The minister recites the words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return", or "Repent, and believe the Gospel." The ashes are made from the left over palms of last year's Palm Sunday and mixed with oil to form a paste.



Ash Wednesday occurs 46 days (40 days not counting Sundays) before Easter.

Dependent on when Easter falls each year, it is a moveable feast. Forty is always a symbolic number. We think of Noah and forty days and nights of rain, of Moses on the mountain with God for forty days, the children of Israel forty years in the wilderness, Elijah's forty day journey to the mountain of God, and Jesus' forty days of trial in the desert. Christians, fortified by Jesus' example and the power of the Spirit, imitate Jesus' time in the desert, taking a serious look at our lives.

Lent is a time of fasting and abstinence. Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 are asked to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. **FASTING MEANS PARTAKING OF ONLY ONE FULL MEAL A DAY.** Some food (not equaling another full meal) is permitted at breakfast and around midday or in the evening—depending on when a person chooses to eat the main or full meal. It is a laudable practice to fast on all days of Lent, except Sunday, which always reminds us of the joy of the Lord's Resurrection. One is not bound to fast if health or the ability to work is affected!



In addition, all Catholics 14 years old and older should abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and all the Fridays of Lent. WE ABSTAIN FROM THE USE OF MEAT, but not of eggs, milk products or condiments made of animal fat.



We fast to feel the emptiness in our body, our appetite for food. It reminds us of the emptiness of our soul and that our real desire is God. Fasting makes us aware of sin in the world; the unjust marketing that leaves so many starving. In solidarity we unite our fasting as prayer for the starving. Also, as we fast and pray, we make solidarity with those addicts who cannot deny themselves their cravings. We pray that God strengthen their wills and transform their hearts.

Canon Law and our bishops remind us of other works and ways of doing penance: prayer, acts of self-denial, almsgiving and works of personal charity. Attending Mass daily or several times a week, praying the rosary, making the way of the cross, attending a parish evening prayer service, teaching the illiterate to read, reading to the blind, helping at a soup kitchen, visiting the sick and shut-ins and giving an overworked mother a break by baby-sitting—all of these can be even more meaningful and demanding as Lenten penances.

