

RCIA HO Class 21 Lent begins with Ash Wednesday.

Ashes or dirt symbolizes the dust from which man was created by God, and the fact that we will return to dust when we die. The ashes come from burning the palms blessed and used on Palm Sunday. Ashes are a SACRAMENTAL NOT A SACRAMENT. Sacramentals (like holy water) dispose us to co-operate with the grace that comes from the sacraments. Ashes do not give grace like the sacraments do. Two nightmares that happen on Ash Wednesday:

“I don’t want that (the Eucharist), I want ashes.” And, “I got ashes on Ash Wednesday, but they didn’t work”.

One of the purposes of Lent is to die to oneself in order to live more completely for God. The following words are said as ashes are imposed on the forehead or head: *Arrepiéntete y cree en el Evangelio; o Acuérdate, de que eres polvo, y a polvo has de volver.* Repent and believe in the Gospel or Remember O Man that you are dust and unto dust you shall return. *Memento homo quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris (Latin)*

Lent lasts for 40 days. 40 is the number of days of the Flood, the years of the Israelites wandering in the desert, the days of Jesus’ preparation to begin his public ministry, the time of Moses and Elijah in preparation for their vocations as prophets. The number symbolizes the fullness of time, or just the right amount of time.

The traditional three practices during Lent are increased prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (= works of charity).

Conversion toward God. Lent is a practice session for every day of the rest of our lives. It seems that a lot of grace must come into the world around this time because, so many people are trying to return to God.

Fasting and abstinence rules: Every Catholic over 18 and under 59 is obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Only one meatless meal is allowed to be taken. Two other small meals without meat may be taken IF NECESSARY, but they may not add up to more than one regular meal.

Everyone over 14 is obliged to refrain from eating any meat at all on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all Fridays during Lent.

The object is to focus our attention on God instead of our own desires, and to empty ourselves of the things of the world in order to be “filled up” by God.

RCIA WKSH Class 21 Ash Wednesday, Lent

Ash Wednesday is considered to be the beginning of Lent. However, there are many misconceptions about Ash Wednesday and ashes.

- 1) **Discussion Question.** Ash Wednesday is not a Holy Day of obligation, yet millions of Catholics who show up to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday pay no attention to the Holy days of obligation. What does this mean? Why is this so?
- 2) Ashes fall into the category of devotional practices in the Church called **Sacramentals**. Sacramentals, like holy water, rosary beads, crucifixes, do not hold magic powers, nor do they give us Grace, as the seven Sacraments do. Rather, sacramentals dispose/prepare us to cooperate with the Grace that comes from the sacraments. In other words, if we get ashes on our head on Ash Wednesday, but never go to Mass, nothing happens to our soul. We persist in a state of mortal sin separated from God. We just have dirt on our head.
- 3) Priests can tell many horror stories about Ash Wednesday. For example, a lady came to a priest in the Communion line, and when he showed her the Host and said, “The Body of Christ”, she said, “I don’t want that. I want ashes.” This is a scary, but true example of someone who does not understand in any way the Church’s teaching about anything at all.
- 4) Once a lady called me to ask what she should do to straighten out her crooked life. I told her to go to Confession and return to the practice of attending Mass on Sunday. She told me that she “got ashes on Ash Wednesday, but they didn’t work”. Of course, they “didn’t work”. They are not supposed to “work”. They are supposed to remind us that WE are supposed to “work” by using the sacraments to keep ourselves in communion with God.
- 5) **Discussion Question.** Why do you think so many people never go to church on Sunday, but show up at the train station to get ashes on their head on Ash Wednesday?
- 6) Lent is the _____ week long period of preparation for the season of _____.
- 7) What three changes do we customarily see at Mass during the Lenten Season?
- 8) Why does the Season of Lent last for 40 days?
- 9) Can you name other events from the Bible that involve the number 40?