

Beginning of Lent

Lent is a season of soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock. Lent originated in the very earliest days of the Church as a preparatory time for Easter, when the faithful rededicated themselves and when converts were instructed in the faith and prepared for baptism. *By observing the forty days of Lent, the individual Christian imitates Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days.*

Pope Benedict challenges us – “renew our acceptance of the grace that God bestowed upon us at that moment (baptism), so that it may illuminate and guide all of our actions. What the sacrament signifies and realizes, we are called to experience every day by following Christ in an ever more generous and authentic manner.’ A ‘sincere inventory of our lives’ will assist us as we seek to be Doers of the Word and not Hearers only. In Lent Christians are called to *metanoia* — a change of mind and heart. This involves reflecting on where we are and determining where we ought to be. Lent is about conversion. It is a season for reflection, soul-searching and repentance. It is a time for new beginnings; about moving closer to Christ and turning our lives more completely over to His way of life. Let us reflect at this time on all the things that keep us from living out our baptismal promises fully. Being a Christian involves more than prayer. We are called to walk with the ‘two feet of justice.’ Works of mercy/charity and works of social action (the promotion of justice) are integral elements of the Christian way of life. May our observance of Lent bring blessings and hope for us all.”

What do we do during Lent?

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving

The three traditional pillars of Lenten observance are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The key to renewed appropriation

of these practices is to see their link to baptismal renewal.

Prayer: More time given to prayer during Lent should draw us closer to the Lord.

Fasting: Fasting is one of the most ancient practices linked to Lent. In fact, the paschal fast predates Lent as we know it. The early Church fasted intensely for two days before the celebration of the Easter Vigil. This fast was later extended and became a 40-day period of fasting leading up to Easter. Abstaining from meat traditionally also linked us to the poor, who could seldom afford meat for their meals. It can do the same today if we remember the purpose of abstinence and embrace it as a spiritual link to those whose diets are sparse and simple. That should be the goal we set for ourselves—a sparse and simple meal.

Almsgiving: It is a sign of our care for those in need and an expression of our gratitude for all that God has given to us. Works of charity and the promotion of justice are integral elements of the Christian way of life we began when we were baptized.



What is Fat Tuesday?

As the Church anticipates the Season of Lent, the evening before Ash Wednesday is called "Fat Tuesday" or Shrove Tuesday. Rich foods are consumed as the faithful prepare for time of fasting, abstinence, confession and penance. Customs and practices arose for Fat Tuesday where people would empty their pantries of many items restricted during Lent. One of the terms often used with **Mardi Gras is "carnival."** Carnival comes from the Latin "carne vale" which means "farewell to meat" or "farewell to flesh" indicating the end to certain pleasures has come. In some parts of the Christian world the commonly used term for the day is "Shrove Tuesday." To "shrive" means to present oneself for confession, penance and absolution. In some early practice, Lent was preceded by Shrovetide the week before Lent. The faithful were called to go to confession during that time in preparation for the Lenten observance.

As part of the celebration of Mardi Gras, it is traditional to bake an oval cake in honor of the three kings (Epiphany) - the King Cake. The shape of a King Cake symbolizes the unity of faiths. Each cake is decorated in the traditional Mardi Gras colors: **purple represents justice, green represents faith** and **gold represents power**. A small baby, symbolizing the baby Jesus, is baked into each cake.



Why do we put ash on our forehead on Ash Wednesday?

Ashes are applied to our forehead in the sign of the cross as the words, "**Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return**" are spoken to us. The other form that is used, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel," emphasizes our call to continual conversion and holiness of life. This act symbolizes our mortality as well as our need for ongoing repentance. It is a reminder that this life is short and merely a foreshadowing of what we shall become through the redemption of Jesus Christ on the cross. The ashes for Ash Wednesday normally are made from the burned blessed palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday. The ashes are sprinkled with Holy Water and incensed before distribution.