

Why Do We Do That: Lent

Ash Wednesday is only two weeks away, and we thought it would be a good idea to use this week's topic to cover all questions relating to Lent. What is Lent, and why do we do the things that we do during Lent?

“When you go to New Orleans, you ought to go see the Mardi Gras”

You've no doubt heard of the “festivities” that go on for Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Nearly every city on the Gulf Coast has some sort of Mardi Gras parade, with Galveston being no exception. So, what makes Mardi Gras such a good day to party? The term “Mardi Gras” translates to English as “Fat Tuesday”, and it is the day before Ash Wednesday which is the beginning of Lent. Since Ash Wednesday is a day of Fasting and Abstinence, and Lent is a long penitential season, customs arose that on the day before Ash Wednesday you'd cook a huge feast for everyone to enjoy before the Lent began. It was kind of like a ‘last hurrah.’ Over the course of centuries, it has evolved into what we see today, seldom keeping with its roots in the faith.

In Louisiana some of the small communities still perform the ‘courier de Mardi Gras’ which is the ‘running of Mardi Gras’ in which riders on horseback go throughout the town collecting the ingredients for a community-wide gumbo.

A more ancient tradition is that of the pancake feast. In the really, really old days the faithful had to abstain from eggs, milk and butter as well as meat during Lent. So, if the family had any stores of this when Mardi Gras came around, they'd make a huge pancake feast so the food would not go to waste.

“You've got dirt on your forehead”

Depending on what time you receive your ashes, don't be surprised if some well-meaning strangers (and even friends) say this to you. So why do we get ashes on the forehead? Since Old Testament times, ashes have been used as a sign of mourning and repentance. Also, ashes symbolizes our mortality, calling to mind that we are dust and to dust we shall return. That the ashes are marked on our foreheads in a cross is an outward sign of Christ's ownership of us.

Did you know that the ashes used on Ash Wednesday are made by burning the dried up palms that were received at the previous year's Palm Sunday? So, that gives you just one more reason to keep that dried up cross that you made during Mass last year. Many parishes burn the old palms on Mardi Gras evening, making it a parish wide event to give a good alternative to the secular celebrations.

“Forty Days and Forty Nights”

So why does Lent last so long? Well the short answer to that is that when Christ began His public ministry, He went to the desert and fasted for 40 days (Matt. 4:2). So, we follow Christ's actions as we perform works of penance, fasting and self denial for 40 days prior to Easter Sunday.

The number forty has special significance in Holy Scripture as a number of discipline, devotion and preparation. Moses stayed on the Mountain of God for 40 days (Exodus 24:18 and 34:28),

The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years (Numbers 32:13) and Nineveh was given 40 days to repent (Jonah 3:4).

Did you know that the 40 days of Lent do not include Sundays? If you count all the days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, you will get more than 40 days. Remove the Sundays and now you get 40 days. This is because every Sunday we celebrate Christ's Resurrection, and it is a time for joy, not sorrow.

“What are you giving up?”

One of the traditions of Lent is giving something up. We do this so that we feel, more fully, the penitential nature of the season. We also illustrate that we have discipline over our desires. This is why we give up something that we actually like.

Did you know that if you ‘give something up’ for Lent, you are not required to abstain from it on Sundays? Again, Sunday is a day that we celebrate, not abstain. So go ahead and drink that Coke on the Sundays during Lent.

“The Fast and The Abstinence”

Fasting and Abstinence are required by Canon Law (Canons 1249-1253) during certain times of the year.

Fasting is defined as eating only one full meal that day. You can eat two smaller meals, but they cannot add up to a full meal, and no snacking is allowed between the smaller meals and the full meal. All Catholics aged 18 – 60 are obliged to observe the fast. Abstinence is defined as refraining from eating meat. All Catholics aged 14 and older are obliged to observe abstinence. Please note that medical and physical conditions can remove the obligation of fasting and abstinence, but you must talk to a priest to see if it applies to your situation.

Every Friday during Lent are days of Abstinence. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of Fasting and Abstinence.

“T.G.I. Friday”

So what makes Friday such a special day? Friday is the day of the week that Christ died on the cross, and therefore it is a day of penance. We should do something penitential on every Friday of the year. On Fridays during the year, it is *suggested* that we abstain from meat (Canons 1249-1253), but we can choose some other penitential act or act of charity. However, during Lent, we are obligated to abstain from meat on Fridays.

Did You Know...

- ...the date of Easter is on the first Sunday after the first full moon of Spring? Christ rose from the dead on a Sunday and we need to celebrate this on a Sunday. So, unlike a birthday where we recognize a date, we base it off the day of the week.
- ...Ash Wednesday is not a Holy Day of Obligation? Holy Days commemorate certain events, particular people, or important theological concepts. Ash Wednesday doesn't fall into any of these categories. Even though it is not a Holy Day of Obligation, most churches are packed to the rafters on Ash Wednesday. What a blessing!