

Why do we celebrate Ash Wednesday? It not only prefigures the mourning at the death of Jesus, but also places the worshipper in a position to realize the consequences of sin. Ash Wednesday is a somber day of reflection on what needs to change in our lives if we are to be fully Christian. Ash Wednesday is the door to the season of Lent. It starts 40 days in which we open ourselves to God, examine ourselves in the presence of the one who created us, who knows us, and who loves us. We have 40 days to be honest with ourselves and to not be afraid of our shortcomings. Lent is preparation for the Church's Easter celebration where the faithful gather to celebrate the marvelous redemption that God has provided.

Why is Ash Wednesday a sober service? Lent is about connecting ourselves to Jesus, and Ash Wednesday acknowledges our human frailty and sinfulness from which we are saved. Ash Wednesday means dying to our old self to start a spiritual renewal. In celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are called to consider our sin in order to fully celebrate the redemptive work of the resurrection. Ash Wednesday forces us to face our mortality and sinfulness so that we may fully embrace our need and desire for God. Ash Wednesday does not celebrate sin but rather recognizes our human state in order to embrace forgiveness.

Is Ash Wednesday only about feeling mournful and guilty? Ash Wednesday is actually about repentance – about turning around, changing our mind, admitting that we have failed in our ways and we need to return to God with all our hearts. We should come to God with a broken, humble, contrite heart. Ash Wednesday isn't about guilt relief but about the transformation of our lives. We are dust, and to dust we shall return. But, with God's grace we can learn to live life more fully, allowing God to conform us to the character of Christ. We embrace our frailty and praise God's strength and redemptive work. Easter proclaims that through Christ, God resurrects us from our dust and ashes, makes us new creatures, and brings life out of death. As Ash Wednesday is the starting point for Lent, it is also the starting point for the redemptive work of Christ in our lives.

Is Ash Wednesday a pagan festival? No it has been a part of the church since the beginning of the celebration of Lent, this happened as early as the second century. It became a formal part of the church in the 9th century.

Who first celebrated Ash Wednesday? The ancient Church that wrote, collected, canonized, and propagated the New Testament observed Lent, believing it to be a commandment from the apostles.¹

Why are ashes used? The ashes symbolize our human condition and identification with the death of Christ. Death comes to all of us (Gen. 3:19; Job 34:15; Psalms 90:3, 104:29, Ecclesiastes 3:20). Jesus conquered death and brought victory through his sufferings.

¹ See *The Apostolic Constitutions*, Book V, Section III.

Ashes also are a biblical symbol of mourning and penance: Job sat in ashes to mourn his losses. Josiah tore his clothes and sat in sackcloth and ashes as he mourned the fact that the Children of Israel had not been following the law of the Lord. Many biblical men and women donned sackcloth and ashes as a way of repentance and mourning. Lent is a time for reflection and self-examination in preparation for Resurrection Sunday.

Ashes have been used in rituals since the time of Moses (Numbers 19:9-10, 17). In early Jewish worship ashes represented purification and cleansing.

Ashes also remind us of our humanness and dependency upon God. Sometimes the priest or pastor will say “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” as a reminder of our beginnings as created in the image of God (Gen. 3 & also Abraham in Genesis 18:27). It is a call to repentance because life is short.

Why is it called Ash Wednesday? It is actually “The Day of Ashes.” It always happens on a Wednesday, thus Ash Wednesday.

What is involved in an Ash Wednesday service? The service could contain the following elements: call to worship, introduction of Ash Wednesday, singing of songs, reading of various Scriptures, and a short message and/or litany. Following the Ash Wednesday sermon or homily a mixture of oil and ashes can be placed on the foreheads of worshippers using the sign of the cross.

What is the history of the imposition of ashes in the Church? In the early church, ashes were not offered to everyone but were only used to mark the forehead of worshippers who had made public confession of sin and sought to be restored to the fellowship of the community at the Easter celebration. However, over the years others began to show their humility and identification with the penitents by asking that they, too, be marked as sinners. Finally, the imposition of ashes was extended to the whole congregation in services similar to those that are now observed in many Christian churches on Ash Wednesday.

Why do people put ashes on their foreheads in the mark of the cross? It is a mark of devotion, remembrance, and ownership. It is a sense of identification with the sufferings of Jesus, and a reminder that he is our Lord. It demonstrates a spirit of humility and sacrifice and displays our sinfulness and frailty. It is a sign of mortality and penance and shows our need for salvation and our desire for repentance.

Why does it have to be on the forehead? It is outward sign that conveys sincerity and openness to community. We are all sinners and we are all on a journey. We celebrate the resurrection together as community and should also acknowledge our need for Him as a community.

Is there something magical about these ashes? The imposition of ashes is a meaningless ritual without a heart that is engaged and willing, repentant and humble. The ritual connects people from churches across the world and with those of the past centuries. It is a tangible expression of an inward commitment.

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