

## Homily of Ash Wednesday, Year C, 2025

**Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51:3-6, 12-14, 17; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18**

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the Lenten season, 46 days before Easter. However, Lent is 40 days since six Sundays in the season of Lent are not supposed to be fast days and are not counted. Each Sunday is a feast day, a mini-remembrance of Jesus' resurrection.

There is an explanation that the word "Lent" comes from an Old English word "*Lencten*" referring to the lengthening of daylight during the spring season. After days of short daylight and nights of long dark night of the winter season, the spring season brings days of long daylight and nights of short dark night. Also, after the harsh winter season when vegetation appears dried up, during the spring season, trees, plants, and flowers begin to grow and bloom; many animals wake up from hibernation; many animals shed their furs; many animals change their coloration; many animals give birth. For us, it is a time to emerge from winter spiritual dryness to spiritual spring. It is a time of spiritual renewal.

The 40 days of Lent represent the 40 years the Israelites' journey to the Promised Land, and the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert before his ministry. On our part, our journey and our desert are of REPENTANCE, PRAYER, FASTING, and ALMSGIVING. The first reading invites us, "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God" (Joel 2:12-13).

ASH AS A SYMBOL REPENTANCE: The ash, traditionally, from the burnt palms of last year's Palm Sunday that is marked on our forehead symbolizes contrition and repentance, which is why the day is called Ash Wednesday. Ash as a sign of contrition and repentance goes back to the Old Testament. Job prayed, "I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). "... the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth. ... [The king] rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes" (Jonah 3:5-6).

When ashes are distributed, the priest or his assistant says, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." This reminds us Jesus' first words when he began his ministry: "This is a time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). Or the priests or his assistant says "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). Do we remember?

We abstain from meat and food that contains meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as a reverence to Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. Abstaining from meat is also an act of contrition and penance.

PRAYER: Why do we have to pray? We pray to keep us in constant communion with God and submission to God. We are empowered spiritually by prayer. Jesus cautioned Peter, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32). He also cautioned his disciples, "Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). Further, prayer drives out the Evil One and his agents. "...

his disciples asked him in private, “Why could we not drive it out? He said to them, “This kind can only come out through prayer” (Mark 9:29).

**FASTING:** There are reasons for Lenten fasting. It is a way of prayer as Jesus did (Matthew 4:2). It is a way of penance and repentance as the people of Nineveh did. It is a way of self-denial and sacrifice. Fasting is not only from food and depriving ourselves of necessities, it includes, as Pope Francis advises, from sins and attitudes. The Pope says,

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and have trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

**ALMSGIVING:** Lenten observance must include works of charity. God gives us what we have, not only for us, but to share with others, especially the needy. “Prayer with fasting is good. Almsgiving with righteousness is better than wealth with wickedness. It is better to give alms than to store up gold, for almsgiving saves from death, and purges all sin” (Tobit 12:8-10).

The second reading of Office of Readings, Tuesday, Third Week of Lent begins with the following words: “There are three things, my brethren, by which faith stands firm, devotion remains constant, and virtue endures. They are prayer, fasting and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains, mercy receives. Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other.” In order words, prayer knocks at the door, fasting opens the door, mercy receives!

In addition to the above-mentioned spiritual duties and exercises, from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday, we are encouraged to attend Stations of the Cross, Lenten Retreat, Penitential Service, Sacrament of Reconciliation and attend more Masses. Lenten journey is a journey of faith and a journey of spiritual renewal. We pray for a Spirit-filled and a fruitful Lenten season. Amen.

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