

## ASH WEDNESDAY

As the holy Season of Lent begins today, we Catholics do something rather strange and perhaps even odd. We gather together to celebrate Mass, and there is nothing strange about that, but within the Mass, the priest blesses ashes which he then proceeds to smear on the foreheads of everyone present.

After Mass, everyone who attended goes off about their daily business marked with the sign of the cross on their forehead in ashes. Some go to work, some to school, others to the grocery store or the library or wherever.

When they see us, our fellow Catholics and other Christians are reminded that it's Ash Wednesday and Lent has begun. Those who have no religion also see us and they wonder if we know about the dirt smudge on our forehead. Once and awhile some kind soul will even tell us we have some dirt on our foreheads. This gives us an opportunity to tell them about Lent.

Ashes have always been a sign of penance. In ancient times, people sprinkled ashes on their heads and over themselves when doing penance for sins. We mark the beginning of this penitential season of Lent by doing exactly the same thing.

Along with the ashes, the priest says, "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return." These words are to remind us of death.

When we die, there is a prayer which is said at the blessing of the grave. The priest says:

"In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother and we commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust ..."

These prayers remind us that life here on earth will not last. They remind us that just as God created us out of nothing and fashioned our bodies from the dust of the earth, so too when we die, and our souls leave our bodies, the body will again return to the earth from which it came.

The warning, "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return" is a wake up call, an announcement. It says, "Pay attention to what you are doing." Realize that along with your daily affairs, you should also be concerned with your spiritual affairs.

These words remind us that life on earth is not forever, and that we should also pay attention to the needs of our soul and not just the needs of our body.

Lent is a time for us to take a good look at ourselves and our spiritual life. Lent is a time to make a renewed commitment to our daily prayers, or if you have forsaken prayer to begin again.

Lent is a time for us to do penance for our sins, to examine our conscience and see where we might have failed in our duty to love God and neighbor. We make up for our sins by doing penance as the Lord commands.

Lent is a time of almsgiving, a time for renewed generosity in recognition of the many gifts and favors God has blessed us with. It is a time for us to recognize that we are stewards of the things God has given to us and that we must do what we can to help our brothers and sisters in need.

Finally, Lent is a time of reconciliation between us and God. Each of us needs God's forgiveness because we are all sinners. Therefore, each of us ought to go to Confession during Lent. In the Sacrament of Penance we ask for and receive God's forgiveness, and that is why it's so important that we receive this Sacrament regularly and especially in Lent.

So then, as we begin our observance of this holy season, let us take stock of our lives and with renewed energy and the help of God's grace make every effort to pursue a life of holiness so that we might be able to celebrate our Lord's resurrection on Easter with great joy. Amen.