

Ash Wednesday 21st February 2007

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References to sackcloth and ashes as symbols of repentance abound in the Old Testament:

Jeremiah

Isaiah

Daniel

Jonah — where the king of Ninevah repents in sackcloth and ashes.

Judith records ashes on heads as a sign of repentance.

Maccabees prepare for battle by turning to God — in sackcloth and ashes.

Jesus refers to the practice as a symbol of repentance.

Early on ashes were symbolic of admission to the Order of Penitents.

Then there is reference to the use of Ashes on Ash Wednesday in 960.

Generally practised in the 11th century.

Then at the end of the 11th Century, the pope encouraged the general use of Ashes on the Wednesday before Lent.

In the 12th century it was advocated that the ashes be made by burning the Palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday.

So the use of ashes was begun as a way of entering the Order of Penitents — these were people preparing for confession and re-admission to the Church — a similar theme to the penitence of Lent.

These penitents were prepared alongside new christians who were seeking baptism and for whom Lent became the final approach of penitence before baptism at Easter.

Readmission of Penitents and Baptism of Converts (or Catechumens) was celebrated at Easter.

In the Middle Ages the emphasis moved from the preparation for baptism or restoration to focus on the suffering of Christ and personal penance.

With the imposition of ashes we say "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return, repent and believe the gospel."

The whole baptismal meaning is lost and the emphasis is on our mortality — and the incentive to take seriously the call to repentance. The whole question of mortality must have been more of a concern in medieval times with life expectancy very young.

The whole emphasis on mortality was changed by that addition to the words about ashes. "Turn away from sin and believe the gospel" and in a way the aspect of baptismal faith was restored.

We are called to ponder our mortality and to also recognise our need for repentance with the more positive aspect of renewing our faith.

Ash Wednesday calls us to begin a journey of conversion from a recognition of our humanity, to repentance, to faith and ultimately through all of this to the New Life of Resurrection and renewal of our baptismal promises at Easter.

When we receive ashes on our foreheads we remember who we are: — Remember that you are dust.
We remember that we are mortal beings: — and to dust you shall return.

We remember that as baptised people we are on a journey of conversion and reminded that it is an ongoing process from sin — to repentance — to faith.
— Repent, Turn away from sin and believe the gospel.
and that we are together on this journey as the Body of Christ.

Fasting and Feasting: A Benedictine Lenten discipline:

Lent: A Time for Feast or Fasting? You Decide!

At the Ash Wednesday Mass celebrated in the IRL chapel, Fr. Michael Alcantara shared this following meditation during his homily. This beautiful prayer summarizes well the many themes of Lent, and illustrates that it is more than a time of fasting, but also a time of feasting. May the Lord abundantly bless you and your loved ones this Lenten season!

A Lenten Prayer: How to Fast

Fast from judging others; feast on the Christ dwelling within them.

Fast from emphasis on differences; feast on the unity of all life.

Fast from apparent darkness; feast on the reality of light.

Fast from words that pollute; feast on phrases that purify.

Fast from discontent; feast on gratitude.

Fast from anger; feast on patience.

Fast from pessimism; feast on optimism.

Fast from worry; feast on trust.

Fast from complaining; feast on appreciation.

Fast from negatives; feast on affirmatives.

Fast from unrelenting pressures; feast on unceasing prayer.

Fast from hostility; feast on nonviolence.

Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness.

Fast from self-concern; feast on compassion for others.

Fast from personal anxiety; feast on eternal truth.

Fast from discouragement; feast on hope.

Fast from facts that depress; feast on truths that uplift.

Fast from lethargy; feast on enthusiasm.

Fast from suspicion; feast on truth.

Fast from thoughts that weaken; feast on promises that inspire.

Fast from idle gossip; feast on purposeful silence.

Gentle God, during this season of fasting and feasting, gift us with Your Presence, so we can be gift to others in carrying out your work. Amen.