FIFTEEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT LENT

**1. What is Lent?**

Lent is the 40-day period before Easter, which the Church uses to prepare for the celebration of our Lord Jesus Christ’s Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

**2. What is the duration for the period of Lent?**

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, which is the day on which the faithful have their foreheads signed with ashes in the form of a Cross. It ends at noon on Holy Saturday. The 40 days excludes the five Sundays of Lent.

**3. Why do Catholics have their foreheads marked with a cross on Ash Wednesday?**

In the Bible, a mark on the forehead is a symbol of a person's ownership. When a person’s forehead is marked with the sign of the cross, this symbolizes that the person belongs to Jesus Christ, who died on a Cross. This symbolic action is done in imitation of

the spiritual mark or seal that is put on a Christian in baptism, when he is delivered from slavery to sin and the devil, and made a servant of righteousness and Christ (Rom. 6:3-18).

It is also in imitation of the way the righteous are described in the book of Revelation: "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads." (Rev 7:3). So the sealing with the cross means we have been marked for God and are ready to make a covenant with God for 40 days.

**4. Why is the signing done with ashes?**

Ash is a biblical symbol of mourning and penance. In Biblical times the custom was to fast, wear sackcloth, sit in dust and ashes, and put dust and ashes on one's head. While we no longer normally wear sackcloth or sit in dust and ashes, the customs of fasting and putting ashes on one's forehead as a sign of mourning and penance have survived to this day. These are two of the key distinctions of Lent. In fact, Ash Wednesday is a day not only for putting ashes on one's head, but also a day of fasting.

Ashes also symbolize death and so remind us of our mortality. Thus when the priest uses his thumb to sign one of the faithful with the ashes, he says, "Remember, that you are dust and unto dust you shall return," which is modeled after God's address to Adam (Gen 3:19; Job 34:15; Ps 90:3; Ps 104:29, Ecc 3:20). Similar words are said at a person’s burial: "Ashes to ashes; dust to dust," which is also based on God's words to Adam and Abraham's confession, "I am nothing but dust and ashes" (Gen 18:27). Hence when ashes are applied on our foreheads, we are reminded of our mortality and our need to repent before this life is over and we face our Creator. Read 1Sam. 4:12, and 2 Sam. 15:32 for more on ashes.

**5. Where do the ashes used on Ash Wednesday come from?**

They are made by burning palm fronds which have been saved from the previous year's Palm Sunday; they are then blessed by a priest. Blessed ashes were used in God's rituals since the time of Moses (Num 19:9- 10, 17).

**6. Why are ashes from the previous year's Palm Sunday used?**   
Palm Sunday was the day when the people rejoiced at Jesus' triumphal entrance to Jerusalem. They celebrated his arrival by joyfully waving palm fronds. Little did they know that he was coming to die for their sins. By using palms from Palm Sunday, it is a reminder that we must not only rejoice of Jesus' coming but also regret the fact that our sins made it necessary for him to die for us in order to save us.

**7. Why are Sundays excluded from the reckoning of the forty days?**

Because Sunday is the day on which Christ rose, making it an inappropriate day to fast and mourn our sins. On Sunday we must celebrate Christ's Resurrection for our salvation. It is Friday on which we commemorate his death for our sins. The Sundays of the year are days of celebration and the Fridays of the year are days of penance. [Read Nehemiah 8:2, 9-10]

**8. Why is Lent forty days long?**

Because 40 days is a traditional number of discipline, devotion, and preparation in the Bible.

Moses stayed on the Mountain of God 40 days (Ex 24:18, 34:28),

Elijah traveled 40 days before he reached the cave where he had his vision (1 Kings 19:8), Nineveh was given 40 days to repent (Jon 3:4), And most importantly, prior to undertaking his ministry, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness praying and fasting (Matt 4:2).

Since Lent is a period of prayer and fasting, it is fitting for Christians to imitate their Lord with a 40-day period. Christ used a 40-day period of prayer and fasting to prepare for his ministry, which culminated in his death and resurrection, and thus it is fitting for Christians to imitate him with a 40-day period of prayer and fasting to prepare for the celebration of his ministry's climax, Good Friday (His crucifixion) and Easter Sunday (His Resurrection). Thus the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "'For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sinning' [Heb 4:15]. By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert." (CCC 540).

**9. What are the appropriate activities during Lent?**

I. Giving up something we enjoy for Lent (the practice of Self denial). So that we can discipline the will and devote ourselves to prayer.

II. Doing physical or spiritual acts of mercy for others (corporal and spiritual works of mercy)

III. Prayer, fasting and abstinence

IV. Giving a devoted attention to our duties

V. Going to confession

VI. Other acts expressing repentance in general.

VII. Attending Stations of the Cross

VIII. Taking part in retreats and recollections

**10. What is a day of fast and abstinence?**   
Under current canon law in the Western Rite of the Church, a day of fast is one on which Catholics who are eighteen to sixty years old are required to keep a limited fast.

A day of abstinence is a day on which Catholics fourteen years or older are required to abstain from eating meat (Can. 1252)

**11. What are the days of Fasting and Abstinence in Lent?**

I. Ash Wednesday

II. All Fridays during Lent are days of abstinence.

III. Good Friday, the day on which Christ was crucified, is another day of both fast and abstinence.

IV. Apart from the days above all other ordinary days in Lent are appropriate for fasting or abstaining. (Cf. Can. 1249-1253 for what the Canon law says on days of Penance)

**12. Can certain people be exempted from fasting or abstinence?**

Yes. Children are not required to fast, but their parents must ensure they are properly educated in the spiritual practice of fasting. Those with medical conditions requiring a greater or more regular food intake can easily be dispensed from the requirement of fasting by their pastor. Again, persons with special dietary needs can easily be dispensed by their pastor.

**13. Is there a biblical basis for abstaining from meat as a sign of repentance?**

Yes. The book of Daniel states: "In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia . . . 'I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.'" (Daniel 10:1-3) By giving up good things and denying them to ourselves we encourage an attitude of humility, free ourselves from dependence on them, cultivate the spiritual discipline of being willing to make personal sacrifices, and remind ourselves of the importance of spiritual goods over earthly goods.

**14. Why are Fridays during Lent days of abstinence?**

This is because Jesus died for our sins on Friday, making it an especially appropriate day of mourning our sins by denying ourselves something we enjoy. (Just as Sunday, the day on which he rose for our salvation is an especially appropriate day to rejoice). Apart from the Fridays in Lent, the Code of Canon Law states that all Fridays through the year are penitential days and time throughout the universal Church. (Can. 1250).

**15. What are some of the Liturgical changes at Mass during Lent?**

According to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) and in order to enhance the penitential nature of the season, these are some of the changes we should expect during the season of Lent:

I. The Gloria is sung on all Sundays, solemnities and feasts and special celebrations of a more solemn character except in the seasons of Advent and Lent. (GIRM #53)

II. Alleluia is sung in every season except in Lent.

III. During Lent, in place of the Alleluia, the verse before the Gospel is sung, as in the Lectionary. (GIRM #62)

IV. During Lent it is forbidden for the altar to be decorated with flowers. Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent), solemnities and feasts are exceptions. (GIRM #305)

V. In Lent the playing of the organ and musical instruments is allowed only to support the singing. Exceptions are Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent), solemnities and feasts. (GIRM #313)