

The season of Lent begins on February 22 this year. With its popular church fish dinners and tradition of “giving up” a favored indulgence, this 40 day period may be the best known of the Church seasons.

Ash Wednesday: The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. The name derives from the tradition of placing ashes on the forehead of the devout. In the Bible, placing ashes on the head was a public symbol of humble repentance. Catholics continue to use this public sign to mark the start of this season of transformation. The ashes also remind us of our mortality. But, death is never the end of the story. We will stand before God, in our hands, the offering of our lives. Lent provides us the opportunity to take stock of the gift that we are preparing.

Ash Wednesday is February 22 this year. At Our Lady of Mercy, ashes will be distributed during Mass at 8:30 AM and 7:00 PM.

Purple: Although the ashes wash off, we continue to be reminded that we are in a penitential season, a period of transformation by the physical space in which we gather each week. Purple is the traditional color of penance. Lent is a time to embrace those disciplines that will help us straighten out the path of our lives. Like the voice of our GPS system, Lenten penances instruct us how to recalculate our course so that we can reach our spiritual destination.

Fasting: If you have ever been truly hungry, gone without food for a prolonged time, you know how hunger pangs can consume a person’s thoughts. A starving person is consumed by the desperate craving for food. According to both the Gospel of Matthew and Luke, Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days prior to beginning his public ministry. At the end of that period of time, Satan taunted Jesus by encouraging him to miraculously turn stone into bread. Famously Jesus replied “Humans do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God.” And so we fast during Lent. We experience a bit of hunger so that we can ask ourselves “What do I live by? What gives me life and my life meaning?” When the hunger caused by fasting begins to preoccupy our thoughts, we are forced to come to terms with our spiritual hungers. Do we crave a relationship with God with the intensity we crave physical food?

Catholics are expected to fast on Ash Wednesday (February 22) and Good Friday (April 7). On these days we limit our consumption to one full meal and refrain from all snacks.

Abstinence: To abstain is to eliminate from our lives something that we want or enjoy, but which we do not need. Abstaining allows us to open up space in our lives and heart for the Holy Spirit. Abstaining from treats such as soft drinks, or desserts enables some to save money which is donated to those in need. Abstaining from video games or television creates extra time for prayer or acts of service. Abstaining from critical comments or gossip heals hurts and transforms relationships. What is it that I hold with such a clenched fist that there is no space for God’s hand to slip in? What fights with God for my attention? The answer to that question may be the perfect object of a Lenten practice of abstinence.

To unify us as a family, Catholics are asked to abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and all Fridays of this season. In this practice, we are more closely united with our sisters and brothers around the world who live in poverty and for whom meat is a rare luxury.

Almsgiving: Almsgiving is the charitable service for the poor and powerless. The Christian journey is never a private affair between an individual and God. If we pray the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, “Our Father...” we have to recognize that we are all brothers and sisters. Families care for one another. The Lenten discipline of almsgiving with its call to serve those in need and share our blessings with those who are hurting, demands that we evaluate our responsibility as stewards. How am I using the talents, the time, the treasures that God has entrusted to me? Am I using these blessings for my own enjoyment or for the delight of God and the good of my neighbor?

At Our Lady of Mercy, we promote Operation Rice Bowl. This calendar of Lenten family devotions, global awareness and charitable giving is sponsored by Catholic Relief Services.

Prayer: Prayer is about fostering a relationship with God. Prayer slows us down, invites us to listen, to open our heart, to be with and come to know God, Father, Son and Spirit. Read Scripture or sit in silence, Sing your prayer at full volume or write your prayer in a journal, find your sacred space in the corner of the church or a clearing in the woods. God made each of us unique and the variations are a source of delight for God, so the prayer style that is best for you will be pleasing to God. Make this Lent a season of renewed prayer.

Stations of the Cross, a traditional Lenten devotion, is prayed each Friday of Lent at 7:00 PM.

Study: Complacency is a spiritual temptation with deadly potential. As we move through Lent, we are reminded that we do not know all we need to know about our relationship with God. Parishes and retreat houses across the country offer opportunities for individuals to grow in their understanding of the faith they profess. Commit to spiritual reading, attend a Bible Study, make a parish mission, use a daily reflection book, however you do it, make study part of your Lent.

The Wednesday Pastus offer nourishment for spirit at the Eucharist, body over a soup supper and mind through a guest speaker. Lenten Pastus will be held on March 1, 8 and 22. Our annual Parish Mission will also challenge your heart and mind on March 12 @ 4:00-7:00 PM.

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40 Days: Forty is a period that signifies transition or transformation in the Bible. From the wilderness journey of the Hebrews of Exodus to the wilderness time of Jesus, from the flood waters of Noah to the Christian preparation for the waters of Baptism, forty calls to mind preparation. The 40 days of Lent is our period of preparation, our time to ready our hearts and lives to celebrate the Mystery of Easter. Lent is a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey where the emphasis is not so much on arriving at a destination as it is on the impact the road has on the traveler. This is a perfect time of year to travel. How about joining the family of Our Lady of Mercy on this amazing sojourn! With God programming your Lenten GPS, you are guaranteed an awesome experience.