

Seven questions and answers about Ash Wednesday

Kids love Ash Wednesday and they are often interested in the meaning behind the ritual of ashes. Here are some common questions and answers about the day.

1. Who can receive ashes?

On Ash Wednesday the procession to the altar is as diverse as we will ever see it! Mothers carrying babies, toddlers holding on to Dad's hand, teens, parishioners, neighbors, employees from nearby places of business, the elderly—we all come together to mark the beginning of Lent. Anyone, including kids and non-Catholics, can receive ashes.

2. Are ashes a sacrament?

The act of receiving ashes is not a sacrament. Actually, ashes are what we call a “sacramental.”

Sacramentals are dynamic signs that help us prepare for receiving the sacraments. They help us receive the graces of the sacraments and they help make holy various occasions in our lives. They also remind us that all of creation has the potential to reveal God's presence and receive his blessing.

3. Where do the ashes come from?

The ashes are traditionally made by burning last year's Palm Sunday palms. In the United States, the custom is to mark the cross on a person's forehead, but in other parts of the world, including in Italy, the ashes are sprinkled on a person's head.

4. How do you get ashes?

Ashes are blessed and distributed on Ash Wednesday, often during Mass or a prayer service. People walk up to the altar

using the same process as Communion. The person distributing the ashes marks the recipient's forehead and says either, "Remember that we are dust and unto dust we shall return," or "Repent and believe in the Gospel."

5. Should I do anything special before I receive the ashes?

In receiving the ashes, we are entering into the time of Lent, preparing for Easter with prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We are embracing Jesus' journey: the cross of suffering and the promise of Resurrection. The ashes help us connect the spiritual aspect of Christ's cross and Resurrection with our everyday lives.

In addition to the liturgical significance of receiving ashes, we also are called to remember that in our repentance is a call to proper relationship between ourselves, God, and each other. Saying a prayer of repentance and remembering your sins is an appropriate way to prepare to receive the ashes.

6. How long should I leave on the ashes?

The ashes on our foreheads are a visible sign that we are followers of Jesus. The ashes are also a way to tell ourselves and those around us that we are beginning the holy season of Lent—the forty days leading up to Easter. Leaving them on helps you remember this throughout the day, but there are no rules requiring how long you leave them on or when you wash them off.

7. Is Ash Wednesday a Holy Day of Obligation?

Despite being one of the most-attended holy days of the year by Catholics around the world, it is not an official holy day of obligation.

Following in the footsteps of Christ during Lent

From our Jewish roots we learn the importance of caring for the poor. We teach our children the importance of giving alms and sharing resources, and we teach them how to choose who will receive the resources that we share. Jesus also teaches us about the importance of prayer. Jesus prays seventeen times in the Gospels; he models prayer for us today. In the Scriptures Jesus prays often, morning and night. He prays during critical events in his life and he prays before ministering to people in need. Lent calls us to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Ashes mark the beginning of our walk.

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