

Ash Wednesday

Meaning and Origins of the Ashes Explained

Lent is a word that means *springtime* and is a 40 day season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday which this year it is on March 5. On this special day of reflection, Catholics wear a marking of the cross on their foreheads. The ashes symbolize our mortality - "*Remember you are dust, and dust you shall return*".

But where do the ashes for Ash Wednesday come from?

Usually, the Ash Wednesday ashes are created by burning palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebration. Palm Sunday is the last Sunday of Lent and leads into Holy Week. It is on this day that people laid palms to cover Jesus' path as he arrived in Jerusalem, just days before he was crucified.

Since the palms have been blessed, instead of throwing them away after the celebration of Palm Sunday, they are saved to create ashes for Ash Wednesday. Sometimes, the ashes are scented with incense and christened by holy water.

Ash Wednesday begins a time when we remember that Jesus spent 40 days in the desert fasting and resisting temptation. The day before Ash Wednesday, known by many as *Shrove Tuesday* or *Fat Tuesday*, is a chance to feast and indulge. We do this in preparation of our own fasting on Ash Wednesday and through Lent.

As Jesus grew hungry from the fasting in the desert, he was faced with the first of three temptations. Satan appeared before Him and told Him to turn stone into bread. But Jesus resisted, knowing that he was being tempted to do something God did not want. He knew the Word of God was just as important as bread to survive.

He was then brought to the top of a building in Jerusalem and told that if he truly was the Son of God He should jump from the building and angels would carry Him to safety. Jesus once again resisted, knowing not to challenge God.

On the third temptation, Jesus was brought to the top of a mountain and told that the kingdoms He saw would be His if he knelt before Satan. But Jesus resisted again, proclaiming that it is only right to give worship to God.

Just as Jesus faced temptations in the desert, we too face many temptations in our everyday lives. As we celebrate the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday, we are encouraged to think about how we can better ourselves.

Along with reminding us of our mortality, the ashes on Ash Wednesday are also symbolic of grief from the sins we have committed. We may not always be able to resist temptation as Jesus did, but Lent provides an opportunity to reflect, pray and repent for sins. In doing so, many people make sacrifices or commit to life changes throughout the 40 days of Lent. It's a time for spiritual fasting so that we can cleanse our souls.