

Bent on Lent

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Well, now we're in Lent. Ever wonder how the beginning of Lent is calculated? In the larger part of western Christianity (the Eastern Orthodox Churches calculate it differently), it is 40 days before Easter (not counting the Sundays), with the date of Easter itself calculated as being: 1) the first Sunday, 2) after the first full moon, 3) after the spring equinox. Got that? It varies so much from year to year because Easter is actually based on the old lunar calendar of the Jewish faith, since Jesus' resurrection—the very reason for the Easter celebration—occurred at the time of the Jewish Passover. So...you can delve into the intricacies of the ancient lunar calendar, or ... you can just look at the parish calendar like the rest of us.

At times, we Catholics have people ask, especially on Ash Wednesday: "What is the purpose of Lent? Why do you Catholics go around with those ashes on your face?"

The ashes serve to remind us that our physical lives are "oh so temporary" ... and that, physically, we are nothing ... little more than

dust and ashes destined to return to the earth. To the atheist, we humans seem as bundles of unbelievably complex self-sustaining, self-animating, self-replenishing chemical reactions (the human body contain 30-40 TRILLION cells!). And yet Christians understand that the soul—that animating spirit within us which transcends mere nature and which enables us to plan, to create, to reason, compose, and to worship—is *supernatural* ("above nature", and therefore *must* be created by a supernatural being: God, our Father and Creator. Thus, to this existence-creating Father we owe our very being, our love and our dedication.

And yet, in our passions and weakness, we rebel against our Heavenly Creator ... pursuing selfishness against His design and to the detriment of our fellow Man.

But Lent and its devotions are designed to aid us in recalling these realities...to seek forgiveness for failures against our Creator and our fellow Man, and to re-orient us to reject evil and to seek the Good. As



we hear in the Mass for Ash Wednesday: "Even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God." (Joel 2:12-13)

Yet the fasting, the Friday abstinences from meat, the ashes, etc., are not goals in themselves, but rather tools of self-denial to help focus us on what God desires of us, such as those things the prophet teaches us:

This...is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly... Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked...and not turning your back on your own. If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech... If you bestow your bread on the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted...Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...you shall call, and the Lord will answer, you shall cry for help, and He will say: 'Here I am!' (Isaiah 58:6-9)

In other words: love God first of all, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

We are quite aware that death soon comes for us all, and we and all our material possessions are soon dust and ashes ... we then to stand before the merciful judgment seat of God.

Thus with the ashes and the starkness of the Lenten liturgies we are brought to ponder: What in the world is significant compared to eternity? Why do we focus so much upon the moment and yet forget about forever?

...reminding us of the psalm: "Oh men, how long will your hearts be closed, will you love what is futile and seek what is false?" (Psalm 4) And Isaiah: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not [true] bread, and your labor for that which does

not satisfy?" (Isaiah 55:2) ... for, as we realize with age: "... the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing..." (Ecclesiastes 1:8) There is always that desire for the indescribable "something more" to satisfy the emptiness we all cannot escape. Such are questions not limited to Christian reflection, but are long-held wisdom throughout all religions. As St. Augustine so famously wrote: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

So ... Lent is for us to reflect on our lives ... to realize where we have failed God and neighbor. In this self-examination we need be honest, rigorous—and even merciless—in our self-examination ... to cleanse out the bad from ourselves while cultivating the good.

So, on Ash Wednesdays when we Catholics go trotting around with ashes on our foreheads, know that we do it in proclamation of our devotion to God and (hopefully) devotion to the Good—beginning a 40-day re-orientation through self-denial and self-reflection. And remember ... in large part we do it for the world—that we might become more tolerant and charitable to our families, our co-workers, and even any adversaries or those who dislike us ... to all whom we meet ... for, whether they believe or not, WE believe that they, too, are a beloved child of God...one whom Christ loved so much that He was crucified for them. Thus, we seek to ever improve (albeit flailingly) our observance of the command given us by Jesus Himself: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

So, do not shrink from Lenten devotions, ashes on forehead, etc. Go courageously with Christ's sign upon you ... remembering the salvation He won for us upon the cross ... and boldly and unabashedly proclaim with Joshua by the cross of ashes or the crucifix you wear: "...choose this day whom you will serve...[but] as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD!!" (Joshua 24:15)

