

Article: “Imposition of Ashes and Fasting for Lent”

We are fast approaching the season of Lent. One practice that is still carried out in some churches is the imposition of ashes.

The practice of the “imposition of ashes” began in the Middle Ages, during the observance of the 40 days of Lent, which began on Ash Wednesday. On Ash Wednesday, the faithful would approach the altar to receive a smear of ashes placed on their foreheads by the officiant or priest, sometimes in the mark of a cross.

Actually, in the first three centuries of the early Church, when Christianity was outlawed throughout the Roman empire, only three “holy days” (holidays) were observed: Resurrection Sunday (Easter), Ascension Thursday (the ascension of Jesus 40 days after Easter), and Pentecost Sunday (the giving of the Holy Spirit - the “birthday” of the Church, 50 days after Christ’s resurrection.)

After Christianity was legally tolerated by Roman emperors (beginning with Constantine, 310 A.D.), the Church calendar expanded to include observances such as Christmas and Lent. Early on, just three days were set aside: “Good Friday” (Jesus dies on the cross), Holy Saturday (Jesus in the tomb), and Resurrection Sunday (Easter). Then the Church expanded this to “Holy Week,” beginning with Palm Sunday to Easter. By the Middle Ages, the forty-day season of Lent was added, inspired by Biblical references to 40 days, such as the days of Noah, Moses on Mt. Sinai, Elijah, Jonah’s warning to Nineveh, Jesus in the wilderness, and Jesus 40 days after His resurrection. “Lent” comes from an Anglo-Saxon term meaning to “lengthen,” as in the season of spring, the daylight hours noticeably lengthen.

Curiously, the very Gospel lesson that is read in most churches on Ash Wednesday comes from Matthew 6:16-18 [Jesus said,] *“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

The practice of the imposition of ashes is at best an optional custom or tradition and not to be understood as a Biblically legalistic command to be carried out or as a sacramental act receiving a special measure of grace. Therefore, if a church offers it, it is up to the individual’s discretion whether to participate.

What about Fasting During Lent?

“Fasting” is not referenced directly in the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible). In the ESV, the Old Testament uses the term “fasting” twelve times and the New Testament eight times. There are different kinds of fasting. We break the fast of not eating all night when we sit down to eat “break-fast.” We may have to fast for so many hours before a medical procedure. We may lose our appetite during upsetting times and/or working through grief. In other words, we can voluntarily or involuntarily fast for various reasons. The basic reason for “giving something up for Lent” (a personal, voluntary, self-determined choice) may help the individual observe and focus on self-reflection and the season’s sober, penitential aspect leading up to Holy Week. Spiritually, it should not be mandated. Martin Luther comments on fasting in his Small Catechism on the Lord’s Supper, “Fasting and bodily preparation are indeed a fine outward training, but he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.’” *LSC* “The Sacrament of the Altar – Part IV”

The imposition of ashes and fasting has no bearing on our salvation. Rather, as we fast approach another season of Lent, we prepare our hearts to receive our crucified and risen Lord, remembering that He gave all for us.