

ASH WEDNESDAY

THE FIRST DAY OF LENT

In the Roman Catholic Church, Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, the season of preparation for the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday.

While Ash Wednesday is not a Holy Day of Obligation, all Catholics are encouraged to attend Mass on this day in order to mark the beginning of the Lenten season.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF ASHES

During Mass the ashes which give Ash Wednesday its name are distributed. The ashes are made by burning the blessed palms that were distributed the previous year on Palm Sunday;

After the priest blesses the ashes and sprinkles them with holy water, the faithful come forward to receive them. The priest dips his right thumb in the ashes and, making the sign of the cross on each person's forehead., says, "Remember, man, thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return."

FASTING AND ABSTINENCE ARE REQUIRED

The Church emphasizes the penitential nature of Ash Wednesday by calling us to fast and abstain from meat. Catholics over the age of 18 and under the age of 60 are required to fast, which means they can eat only one complete meal and two smaller ones during the day, with no food in between. Catholics who are over the age of 14 are required to refrain from eating any meat, or any food with meat, on Ash Wednesday.

TAKING STOCK OF OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

The fasting and abstinence is not simply a form of penance, however, it is also a call for us to take stock of our spiritual lives. As Lent begins, we should set out specific goals we would like to reach before Easter and decide how we will pursue them - for instance, by going to Mass and receiving the sacrament of reconciliation.

