

Do you know? #5

ASH WEDNESDAY

No! Ash Wednesday did not get its name from the Ash Wednesday Fires in Victoria, as one person answered when the subject of Ash Wednesday came up. We all know the fires occurred on a recent Ash Wednesday; thus, the name Ash Wednesday Fires.

Ash Wednesday has lost a lot of meaning for 'Sunday Catholics', as can be seen by the fall in attendance at Holy Mass on Ash Wednesday. Generally, Parishes have several Masses to suit most 'working' people regardless of occupation/duties but beware, it can easily become merely a pious habit, 'something we Catholics do'. Yet, like everything in our Catholic Faith, the liturgical feast of Ash Wednesday and the custom of ashes has an ancient, rich history, deep in meaning and rich in symbolism.

Why do we need Ash Wednesday with its fasting and abstinence? Why do we need to have ash on our forehead? Where do the ashes come from?

The ashes are the burnt remnants of palms distributed on the previous year's Palm Sunday; they are finely crushed, and mixed with Holy water and incense to make a fine paste. Another bowl of ashes is kept dry to be sprinkled on the head of the recipient. This latter sprinkling has gone by the wayside over the years, mainly because it takes too much time, especially in major centres.

Why this sprinkling and anointing by the Priest of ashes on our foreheads? Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the 40 days of Lent; symbolically, the 40 days Our Lord spent fasting in the desert. Ash Wednesday is also reminiscent of sack cloths and ashes worn by public penitents: a Jewish practice. The cross is a reminder that we are Christians on our life's journey, who were saved by the ultimate sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.

So now we can tie Fasting and Ashes to early rituals of the young Church carried on as acts of penance for modern man.

Lent really has 46 days, but we discount the 6 Sundays when we celebrate Holy Mass; Sunday is also a day for families to celebrate special occasions, particularly First Sacraments, Birthdays and Baptisms, although the Sacraments were often limited by parishes.

The ashes on our foreheads are worn throughout the day, in public, as a sign of our Catholic faith and a reminder that we are but creations of God from the earth. The Priest prays, *'Remember, man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return'*. And so, our spiritual self is reminded of the greatest gift of God: Faith. The belief in our Creator and a need to refresh that spiritual self through acts of fasting, abstinence and works of charity.

If we can abstain from eating meat on Fridays, then we are in step with our Traditional past.

PJC