

Lent talk:

How do we determine when Easter happens each year and when Lent starts? The Council of Nicaea in 325 decreed that Easter will always be celebrated the first Sunday that follows the full moon on or after the spring equinox, (March 21). The earliest date that Easter can happen is March 22 and the latest is April 25. This year we celebrate Easter on April 24th. There are 40 days in the Lenten season. We do not count the Sundays as every Sunday is a day of celebrating the resurrection of Christ and cannot be observed as a day of penance. Therefore, Ash Wednesday can occur as early as February 4 and as late as March 10. This year Ash Wednesday falls on March 9th.

Lent begins on Wednesday. Mardi Gras and Carnivale are in full swing for the next few days. Shrove Tuesday means pancake races and eating lots of flapjacks! Parishioners need to use up all their eggs, milk and butter before it's time to fast. But that all changes on Wednesday. Lent is a time of reflection, austerity and penance. We will receive ashes on Wednesday. It's believed that ashes were introduced to the church by Pope Gregory I and became universal by a special church council in 1091. As the priest or Eucharistic minister makes the sign of the cross on our foreheads and says: "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." In the middle ages, people would publicly confess their sins to the congregation and put on sackcloth covered with ashes and would wear the garment as a penance, sometimes for the whole Lenten season! They would be welcomed back to the church during the Easter vigil. Many people did not shave, bathe, cut their hair or talk out loud to others until Holy Thursday. Public confessions fell out of favor by the 10th century, in favor of privately confessing their sins to a priest.

The word Alleluia or Hallelujah which means "Praise ye the Lord" or "Praise the Lord" are not used in church during Lent. Pope Gregory I, also known as St. Gregory the Great (540–604) ordered that the word Alleluia be used throughout the church year, except during Lent. In France during the middle ages, some churches literally bury the word Alleluia, carrying a coffin representing the Alleluia out of the church in a formal procession complete with cross, candle, holy water and incense. Today, some churches have a scroll with the word Alleluia written on it and it is solemnly carried out of the church and is buried or hidden throughout the Lenten season. During the Easter Vigil the scroll is carried back into the church and the use of the word Alleluia is reinstated. Holy Saturday is sometimes called Alleluia Saturday.

In many countries people make and eat pretzels on Ash Wednesday. Pretzels are shaped like a person with his arms folded in prayer. In Latin *bracellael* means "little arms". The German's derived the word to *bretzel* which mutated to the word *pretzel*. Since pretzels are made from water, flour and salt, they were acceptable for Lent. One story says that Monks at the Vatican made them to give to the poor in the 5th century. Another explanation is that a young monk gave them to children for learning their prayers. The Latin word *pretiola* means "little reward", from which *pretzel* could also be derived. Early pretzels were soft, like the kind you can buy at Annie's Pretzels. One story is that a baker fell asleep while the pretzels were baking and overcooked them. At first it was thought be a mistake, but hard baked pretzels last longer than soft ones, so a new pretzel was born. For a long time afterward pretzels were a tradition of lent.

There are some unusual Ash Wednesday practices occurring in different parts of our world.

- For example, in Spain, people bury a strip of meat as thin as a sardine to symbolize the burial of worldly pleasures and acts as a reminder to abstain from meat.
- In England, people make a straw figure dressed in old clothes called a Jack Owlet. JackO'Lent represents Judas Iscariot who is burned in effigy.

Lent continues for forty days, days filled with fasting, self-denial, Christian growth, penitence, conversion and simplicity until Holy Week finally comes. There are a few basic tasks that traditionally have been associated with Lent: fasting, almsgiving and prayer.

- The Church requires people age 18 to 59 to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, unless they have health problems that preclude them from participating. This means only one full meal is permitted each day. The Fridays in Lent are days of abstinence—no meat.
- Lent is a time to develop or strengthen one's prayer life. Some people add additional prayer time to their routines. Saying a rosary everyday or participating in Liturgy of the Hours. Many people attend daily mass during Lent. Choose to read the writings of one of the Saints (perhaps one that you were named after or have an affinity toward or other religious persons like Henri Nouwen or Catherine Doherty to help you grow spiritually. If you have time after the meeting, browse through our church library before you leave St. Hugh's today for some inspiration.
- Almsgiving or charity can be more than giving money to a good cause. It can also be giving of yourself by volunteering time to a group or organization. It can also mean spending time with friends and family or helping someone in time of need. The possibilities are endless—look around you and just do it!

I can't resist sharing with you a clever idea to use with children to help them better understand Lent. It's called the Jelly Bean prayer.

Red is for the blood He gave.

Green is for the grass He made.

Yellow is for the sun so bright.

Orange is for the edge of night.

Black is for the sins we made.

White is for the grace He gave.

Purple is for His hour of sorrow.

Pink is for a new tomorrow.

And handful of jelly beans,

Colorful and sweet,

Is a prayer, a promise,

A loved one's treat!

Happy Resurrection Sunday!

On Ash Wednesday, set out a glass jar for each child, with a small copy of the jellybean prayer attached to it. Each day during Lent, each child can earn a jellybean of any color they followed through on. They could not eat the jellybeans until Easter. They could not earn white jellybeans—these represented the Grace of Christ, which is a gift—not something we earn ourselves. On Easter morning, fill the jar with white jellybeans to represent Christ's grace.

Red: Each morning we choose something to sacrifice that day to earn the red jellybean. It has to be something they would have had the opportunity to have or do on that day.

Green: Earned for doing good deeds. (It was a good deed to provide shade for Jesus with the palm).

Yellow: Earned for sharing God's light through kindness to others.

Orange: Earned for attentive behavior during bedtime prayer time and night time Bible stories.

Black: Earned for going to bed without a fuss.

White: Cannot be earned. Jesus gives us grace—it is not something that we can earn ourselves.

Purple: Earned through apologizing to anyone we hurt with our words or deeds that day.

Pink: Earned when we forgive those who apologized to us for hurtful behavior.

What are you giving up for Lent?? Some people give up the same thing every year. I have a friend whose Mother has given up eating between meals since she made first communion more than sixty years ago. Some people give up sweets or television. Others decide to improve their health by exercising more or being nice to someone they don't like.

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, the sixth Sunday of Lent, when Jesus comes to Jerusalem and is warmly welcomed. We receive iopalms during mass and celebrate his arrival. Our catechists are preparing to complete their preparation for becoming members of the church. It is a busy week of preparation leading up to Easter Sunday. The palms we receive today symbolize triumph and the ashes which symbolize death and penitence, form a symbolic connection between suffering and victory. (burned palms make the ash used for Ash Wednesday). Palms are taken home and are hung over crucifixes or holy pictures. Some people shape the palms into crosses before hanging them. Men sometimes wear a piece of palm in their hats or pin it to their lapels.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday are days of preparation—homes should be spotless by Wednesday evening. The Wednesday before Easter is sometimes called Spy

Wednesday because it is the day Judas betrayed Jesus and set the plans in motion for his arrest and trial.

Holy Thursday is the day that Jesus had his Last Supper and celebrated the first Eucharist with his disciples. The Last Supper took place in the upper room of the house believed to have been owned by John Mark and his mother Mary. After supper Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. During morning mass today there is a special Chrism mass during which the Bishop blesses the oils used in Baptism, Confirmation, holy orders, unction and the consecration of Altars and Churches. At the evening mass the bells ring for the Gloria and are silent until the Easter Vigil. Children are told by their parents that the bells went to visit the Pope and sleep on the roof of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. They will bring Easter eggs back with them when they return home at the Easter Vigil and peal loudly. Just as Jesus washed the apostles' feet before supper, the priest washes parishioners' feet. After the mass the priest removes the host to an altar of repose until after Good Friday. The altar is stripped clear; no bells ring, Holy Water is removed from the stoups and thrown into the sacarium. This ends the first day of the Triduum.

On Good Friday, traditional Catholics wear black, cover their mirrors, extinguish candles or other lights burning before icons and go about the day quietly—it is a day of mourning. No true mass is offered on Good Friday; instead a liturgy called the Mass of the Presanctified is offered. The liturgy consists of lessons, prayers, St. John's version of the Passion, and a long series of the prayers for various intentions. The cross will be unveiled.

- Hot Cross buns are traditionally eaten for breakfast on Good Friday. Legend says that a priest at St. Alban's Abbey in Hertfordshire gave these to the poor on Good Friday starting in 1361. It is customary because of the cross on the buns to kiss them before eating and to share one of these Hot Cross buns with someone reciting these words:

Half for you and half for me,
Between us two shall goodwill be.

Hot Cross buns are said to never corrupt and Catholics used to keep a few all year to grate some of it into water for the sick to consume. Don't forget the nursery rhyme:

Hot Cross Buns! Hot Cross Buns!
One a penny, two a penny, Hot Cross buns!
If you have no daughters give them to your sons,
One a penny, two a penny Hot Cross buns!

Passion Plays were popular in the Middle Ages. One still goes on in Oberammergau, Germany once each ten years. In 1632, the Plague hit the town and 1,500 people died within the year. The village elders gathered at their parish church on October 27, 1633 and vowed to perform Passion plays depicting the passion of Christ every ten years if God would only show mercy and release their village from the clutches of the plague. They performed their first play on Pentecost 1634 and no villager died of the plague since then. In the United States the city of Spearfish, South Dakota puts on a large passion play called the Black Hills Passion Play every year since 1938 after it was instituted by a German immigrant.

The legend of the Dogwood is important to the Passion of Jesus. The Dogwood was as large as oak trees. It was chosen to be the tree that Jesus was crucified on—the dogwood was very distressed and sorry to be used for such a cruel act. Jesus sensed the trees sorrow and told it that the dogwood trees would be much smaller, bent and twisted and its blossoms would be in the form of a cross—two long and two short petals. In the center of the outer edge of each petal there will be nail prints—brown with rust and stained with red and in the center of the flower would be a crown of thorns. If you look at a dogwood tree and its flowers you can see that the legend did come true.

In England at Ayot St. Peter in Hertfordshire, the bells ring out the death knell for people who have died. They ring 9 times for a man, 6 times for a woman and 3 times for a child; pause and then ring one time for each year they lived. At 3pm on Good Friday the bells ring 9 times pause and then ring 33 times to announce Jesus' death to the world.

The Holy Saturday's Vigil mass ends Lent. Parishioners bring Easter Baskets filled with food that will be eaten tomorrow to be blessed by the Priests. Common foods are Easter bread, Easter eggs, meat, butter, horseradish and salt. During the Mass the Catechumens are baptized and the Alleluia returns. The Vigil mass starts in darkness and the Paschal candle is lit. The service is both long and beautiful. Everyone renews their baptismal promises and recite the Litany of the Saints.

Easter Sunday arrives at last. Everyone dresses in their best new clothes. The mass is joyous and celebrates the resurrection of Jesus. Alleluia! Christ is Risen Today!

I'd like to close by sharing part of Pope John Paul II's message for Lent in 2001:

That is why, in this Lenten Season, I want to invite all believers to an ardent and confident prayer to the Lord, because it allows each person to experience anew his mercy. Only this gift will help us to welcome and live the love of Christ in an ever more joyful and generous way, a love which "does not insist on its own way; it is not resentful, it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. With these sentiments, I invoke the protection of the Mother of Mercy on the Lenten journey of the entire Community of believers and impart my heartfelt Apostolic Blessing on each of you.

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Note: I found the Jelly Bean Prayer instructions on <http://www.catholicmom.com>
I found the prayer on <http://mama-jenn.blogspot.com>

JoEllen Sarff, Lent talk presented at St. Hugh's Sodality meeting on March 6, 2011