

The Church's 40-Day Improvement Plan

By Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, March, *People of God*

The annual observance of Lent provides all of us an opportunity for repentance and spiritual renewal. As we prepare to worthily celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, we have the wonderful opportunity for what I like to call “The Church’s 40-Day Improvement Plan”.

What do the ashes placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday mean? Well, they mean we make a commitment to be better people during the 40 days as we prepare for Easter. What we begin to do during the 40 days is the “training” that keeps us on the “improvement plan.” The ashes remind us that we are sinners and that we have failed God, and others, many times. With the grace of Jesus Christ, we have the opportunity to begin anew and to try to rid ourselves of our sinfulness and receive God’s forgiveness. If we didn’t try to improve, the ashes on our foreheads would simply be an empty and eternal sign. If we don’t make efforts to improve, we will not be prepared to fully participate in the Sacred Triduum – the most sacred time in the liturgical year.

Certainly, we should seek to receive the sacrament of confession during Lent. The Catholic church teaches that it is through the absolution of the priest, who represents Jesus, that our sins are certainly forgiven. It is through celebration of this sacrament that, once reconciled, we more closely resemble Jesus and allow others to see the goodness and love of Jesus in us and others as well.

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of fast and abstinence. All the Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence from meat. *Fasting binds all adults until their 60th year. Abstinence from meat applies to everyone 14 years or older.* Remember, our “Improvement Plan” requires some sacrifice – fast and abstinence are an integral part of the plan.

The three traditional Catholic forms of observance of Lent are based on the Gospel of Ash Wednesday, Matthew 5, 16-18. They are: almsgiving or help for the poor and for other church projects; daily prayer such as the Mass and the Stations of the Cross; and fasting – cutting back on our eating and drinking and making other small sacrifices in the name of Jesus. Surely each of us should try to do something positive during the Lenten season. Read that passage (Matthew 6, 16-18) again and again. Pray over it and put it into practice.

Those of us already in the church have the privilege and responsibility to pray during Lent for those coming into the Catholic church at the Easter Vigil, and other who are making their Easter sacraments. And we will be responsible Catholics as we support those newly baptized or renewed in their faith as we continue our “Improvement Plan” even after Easter. We join them in prayer and solidarity as they prepare to receive very special graces in their lives.

Just as spring brings new life out of the dead earth of winter, may God bring new life to you, dear friends, this Lent as you seek to rise above weakness and imperfection. Have a good Lent! Make the most of the Church’s 40-Day Improvement Plan!