

holy ritual: People receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday last year. —Photo: KRISHNA MAHARAJ

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After "The Greatest Show on Earth" comes a most solemn time for reflection. Today, Ash Wednesday is the start of the six-week season of Lent. The day gets its name from the ashes which are distributed at mass in Catholic churches. Lent also heralds the preparation for the season of Easter.

Editor of the Catholic News, June Johnston, adds that the church works in cycles and seasons, each one highlighting an aspect of the belief in a God who became a Man, lived on this Earth, died, was buried and rose again.

"That, basically, is the cycle that is celebrated," she said. "The whole period of Lent is a preparation for renewal of baptism. Every single Sunday in church, through the celebration of the mass, we commemorate that whole cycle. It is just that there is a concerted period of time for looking at yourself again. The words that are said are that you are dust and to dust you will return; we are human, we will die, and our bodies will disintegrate. But we believe that we are more than that through Jesus Christ who rose from the dead."

She continued: "Our real purpose and intention is to go through the same thing he went through. The ashes remind us of our frailty and sinfulness; the fact that we are human, we make mistakes. Lent is a period where we concentrate on prayer, alms giving and penance. We look at ourselves to see where we have gone wrong and what we are not doing in following the way of Jesus, to be aware of it and to do penance in some way or another."

Lent is the 40-day period leading up to Easter. Johnston said that Sundays are not counted.

"You have five Sundays of Lent then you have the final one which is called Passion Sunday or

Palm Sunday leading up to Holy week."

She said in this time there is a concentrated preparation in the Church of those who are going to become Catholic.

"There are certain ceremonies and rights leading up to Easter that are undergone by the catechumen--one who is preparing to be baptised. They would usually be baptised on Holy Saturday."

The ashes used on Ash Wednesday are usually blessed with holy water and come from the dried, burnt palm leaves that are used on Palm Sunday from the year before.

One major aspect of the Lenten season is that of fasting, which Johnston says can be seen as a form of penance.

"Fasting is symbolic. You do away with certain pleasures to be aware that we are not bound for certain things; that we are more than that. Ash Wednesday is a day of fast. It is one of the days that is recommended. People over 60 years of age and children are not bound to fast. You have one main meal for the day."

Following Carnival, there is a noticeable jump in fish prices at the market and fast food outlets offer seafood specials. Johnston is of the belief that abstaining from meat means just that.

"Many people seem to think that not eating meat means that you must eat fish. It doesn't mean that, of course. It's not eating meat, which is quite different from eating fish, especially since in many cases fish can be more expensive than meat. It is just my personal opinion, but I think people should go back to the real meaning of things and why they came about. If we are in the habit of not eating a lot of meat then abstinence [from meat] makes no sense. You may need to abstain from something else. On certain days during lent you abstain from eating meat. Generally it is on a Friday. But you must fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday."

Johnston said that Ash Wednesday is one of those days where one is obligated to fast.

"But there will be people who won't take it on," she said. "If you are going to receive holy communion in the Catholic church you have to fast one hour before. If you are going to mass at six in the morning and would not have had time to eat anyway so you would begin your fast until after. If you are going at midday though then you would maybe have something light and not eat until the end of the day. There are no specific hours to begin and end the fast as in other religious traditions."

Carnival symbolises an indulgence in revelry, food and drink. Johnston said that the day it is in stark contrast to Ash Wednesday when we cast aside things of the flesh--so to speak--to concentrate more on the things of the spirit; that we are spirit and body together. She stressed, however, that a society did not need to have a Carnival for there to be an Ash Wednesday.

"Whether you have Carnival or not, right through the world, the Catholic church observes Ash Wednesday. It has nothing to do with Carnival. [Some] people cannot understand that. It is a fact. There are many places and cultures that have no Carnival but if they are Catholic they will have Ash Wednesday."

Johnston said that in ancient times, a penitent wore sack clothes and ashes, thus making a public statement that he or she had done wrong and was asking for forgiveness. The sign of the cross made with the ashes on foreheads on Ash Wednesday is a symbol of public testimony that one recognises ones sinfulness and that one is saying sorry, seeking forgiveness and seeking to do better.

"If you want to look at the symbolism of ashes beyond the symbolism of it--the fragility of it, that it is dust and it disappears--ashes are also used for cleaning. It has that significance of the recognition of sinfulness or dirtiness but also that it is able to cleanse."

Johnston said that the message one needed to keep in mind during this time is that we are all in need of recognising our sinfulness.

"We are all fragile human beings in need of acknowledging that there is a greater power than ourselves. We have been given the gift and freedom to claim that mercy, that being able to start over again, to forget mistakes. Ash Wednesday is a good time to reflect on ourselves, our lives and when the end comes, what will be left behind. What will be our legacy?"