

Ash Wednesday ushers in Christian season of Lent

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Many Christians walked around with black crosses rubbed onto their foreheads yesterday, and for those wondering why, the answer is simple: **Ash Wednesday**.

Ash Wednesday is the day beginning the holy season of Lent, which is the time Christians use to reflect upon Jesus's going into the desert for 40 days and being tempted by the Devil. The 40 days of Lent lead to one of the most holy days on the Christian calendar - Easter - the day during which the world's Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead three days after he was crucified at Golgotha by Romans after being condemned by Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate.

Father John Wykes of **St. Mary's Catholic Church** in Alton said the ashes of Ash Wednesday are used as a symbol of human mortality, saying human beings began as dust, and to dust we shall all return.

"We are happy to embrace that reminder, because it is a preparation for Easter, which is a festival of resurrection and new life," Wykes said.

He said the ashes must always be distributed within the context of a mass or a liturgy of the Word. He said the ashes must always have such context when being distributed.

Catholics on Ash Wednesday are also called to fast and abstain from eating meat (with the exception of cold-blooded animals such as fish). Wykes said this ascetic tradition is not only a test of self-discipline.

"It is not simply an exercise in self-discipline, which it is, but it is also to remind us of what is important in life," he said. "It's our true needs compared to what we want."

A more folksy method of practicing this sentiment is not officially mandated by the Catholic Church, but it is practiced traditionally. That practice is abstaining from doing something during the 40 days of Lent. Many Catholics choose something they may be better without anyway, such as drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes. Others do without things, which may have taken away from other aspects of their lives, such as video games and social media.

Still, other Catholics try to practice self-discipline not by abstaining from something, but instead by forcing themselves to do something they do not usually do, which may help them strengthen their faith and character.

Each of these practices goes with Wykes's assertion of Lent's purpose - to remind people of their own mortality and need to focus on the aspects of life, which actually matter. Just as Jesus was tempted by the Dark One in the desert with wealth, power and influence, so are human beings. None of those things are required for basic living or even happiness for, as Wykes said, everyone will one day return to dust.