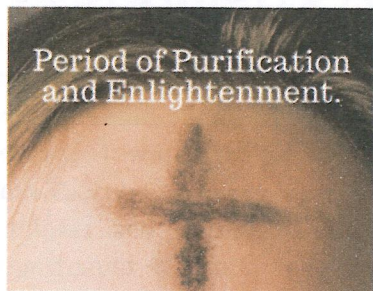


Ash Wednesday (literally)



Period of Purification and Enlightenment.

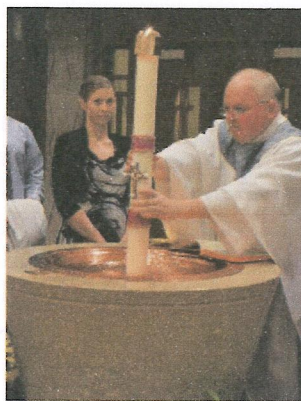
marked us!

It also marked our stepping out on a journey of inner renewal. Lent is referred to in RCIA parlance as the Period of Purification and Enlightenment.

The journey will culminate when we gather in the darkness of Easter Night at the Easter fire. From that kindled fire, a light is taken and contained in a huge Candle which will burn for fifty days. A cry will go up: *Lumen Christi!* —*Christ our Light!* This cry, with its *Deo Gratias* response is repeated three times and during it the light from the great candle is shared by everyone present as their own candles are lit from it. It is a light *divided yet undimmed* as the Easter Proclamation sings. This transition from darkness to light heralds a new Easter and reflects our acclamation of the risen Lord shining his light on his people. The candlelight fills the Church as does the presence of the risen Lord.

Then we settle down to the business of the night, that is, we open the Book of our Scripture at its very first page, hearing the words, "In the beginning", and retelling the story of the unfolding plan of God's salvation in the world; and as we listen we are reclaiming our place in that story and plan. The proclamation of the word of God is the fundamental element of the Easter Vigil. Only once that story has been told and we have responded to it in the singing of the Psalms, will we come to the font of Baptism. The journey from Ash Wednesday will have been for us a journey *from Ashes to the Font*.

At the font, first of all a Litany of Saints will be sung, invoking the help of our ancestors in faith. Then water will be blessed with a prayer which is one of the most beautiful and powerful in the Roman Liturgy. This prayer vividly traces how God has used water as a sign of his divine life from the very beginnings of our story; how at creation *God's spirit hovered over the waters*; how at the Red Sea as the waters parted for the Israelites to "pass over" dryshod, those waters became a prefiguring of the salvation given in baptism, pointing forward to Christ and to the Baptised People of God. The prayer goes on to celebrate the baptismal waters of the River Jordan, and also the blood and water flowing from the side of Christ on the cross, as St John testifies, and as the Church has always understood - the fountain of Sacramental life for God's people.



A dramatic gesture also takes place during this prayer: you will notice that as the blessing of the water draws to its close the Easter Candle is taken out of its holder and then solemnly lowered and raised three times in the waters of the font — a visible symbol of our dying and rising in

Christ through Baptism. As this happens, the Bishop or Priest will pray:

May the power of the Holy Spirit, O Lord we pray, come down, through your Son, into the fullness of this font, so that all who have been buried with Christ by Baptism into his death, may rise again to life with him.

Then we will renew our Baptismal Promises and sprinkled with the new water of the font. This moment is the one to which the Ashes and the Lenten call to self examination and penitence has been leading. Situating the celebration of Baptism at the heart of the Lord's Passover feast, the Triduum, is surely to claim that our Baptism, our initiation into Christ is paschal in character.

Baptism is the door to life in Christ, and to life in Christ's body, it is where the faithful are "born anew". It is, as Saint Paul says to us in his letter to the Romans (also proclaimed in the Liturgy of Easter night), a plunging into his paschal mystery which "signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit without which no-one can enter the Kingdom of God" (Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 1215). The catechism traces (as does the Scripture and ritual of the Easter Vigil) this mystery of Baptism.

[Read paragraphs 1210—1272 for more.]

For those preparing for Baptism and reception into the Church at Easter, as well as for all of us who will renew our Baptismal Covenant at the Vigil, the scriptures of this First Sunday of Lent are a lesson in how strength comes from prayer and from deep contact with the Word of God in scripture. Jesus is our model in this regard, as we hear in the Gospel. As a faithful Jew, he would have studied the Jewish scriptures, as well as honouring his Father in prayer, making pilgrimages to Jerusalem and being present in the synagogue for the worship of God. So let's truly try to attune our minds and hearts to the Liturgy this Lent, and make the most of the opportunities afforded us.