

Ash Wednesday mass is one of the most popular celebrations in the Catholic Church. Even though it's not a holyday of obligation, attendance is often better than on holydays. People turn out in great numbers whenever we give things away – palm branches, throat blessings – even dirt. We put ash on your forehead, we mess up your makeup, and people love it. We proudly wear our ashes in public. They tell everyone we are sinners, and they indicate our desire to change.

But now comes the hard part. Lent is a season we devote to repentance. During Lent we seek a complete change of heart. We need God's help to leave our sins behind. So we spend 6 weeks taking on some kind of penance to extend the intentions of the first day of Lent.

Everyone commits sin. But sometimes we are surprised by the seriousness of the sin we can do. Now is the time to reflect on our past, to face the attitudes and actions that separate us from God and from one another. That is what Lent is for.

In today's first reading, the serpent tempts the woman in the garden. The serpent asks, "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?" That wasn't what God said. The woman corrects the serpent. "We *may* eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die.'"

The serpent tricks the woman's into thinking God is tricking her. It tells her that if she eats, she will become divine, and God wants to keep her human, so God told her to stay away. The woman thinks this over. She knows she is not supposed to eat the fruit of that tree for one good reason: God told her not to. But she comes up with three good reasons to try it. The forbidden fruit was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of it and ate it, and she gave some to her husband and he ate it. Then they realized that they were naked. They were still human, and they had sinned.

This is how raw sin looks. We've all faced it. We think about doing something we know is wrong. We come up with reasons to justify why it's a good idea. We talk ourselves into it, and often we get somebody else to go along. If two or more do it, it's easier to sin. Sometimes people think sin is passive. It just happens to them. But sin always involves a choice. Whenever we sin, it's because we choose to do what is wrong.

After Ash Wednesday comes the hard part – living out what those ashes mean: we acknowledge our sin and we repent.

We'll have a communal penance service on March 3rd this year. Two other priests will be on hand. That night will be a perfect time to complete what we began on Ash Wednesday – to confess our sins and to experience the forgiveness that God alone can give. To make a good Lent, we must repent. Then Christ will open for us the gates of paradise.