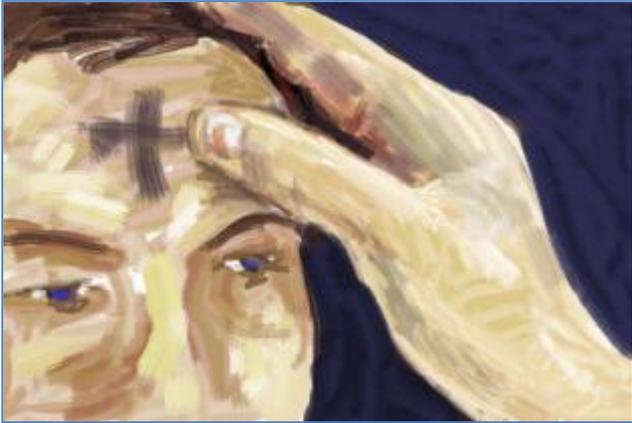




**THE ASHES** that we receive on Ash Wednesday are an important symbol of our acceptance of the death of the old self, in order that we can let God through the Holy Spirit refashion ourselves and our lives in Christ. Lent is the season set aside by the Church to help and encourage this spiritual process to take place. It is a sort of personal spring cleaning which takes place when the whole world of nature around us is in a kind of hidden preparation to burst forth in spring blossom and new life (spring is the original meaning of 'Lent').

The Gospel of John tells us, the wind of the Spirit '*blows where it pleases.*' How or even whether we choose to observe Lent and Easter is entirely up to ourselves. The Church does not make Ash Wednesday and our spiritual activities in Lent a matter of obligation. Our states of mind and heart do not conform either to seasons of nature nor to the liturgical seasons of the Church, especially for example if we are or have been ill or in distress, or are undergoing major changes in life. There is no disgrace in finding ourselves unready to enter into the spirit of Lent, and it is perhaps worth reflecting on what it is we are spiritually seeking to renew within ourselves. It is first and foremost the quality of our love - our capacity to love, whom or what we love, why we love, how we love, and perhaps most particularly whom or what we choose to exclude from our love, and why. Many people find that the sacrament of penance helps in this process, but even here we do have to *want* it to. **Everything we do in Lent should be less a matter of duty, and more a real choice of our deeper selves made in the presence of God.**

# PENANCE FOR LENT



1. **Giving up sin.** God wants us to turn away from sin, laziness in prayer, and unwillingness to do better.

2. **Praying.** Jesus and his apostles tell us to pray always. Traditional times of prayer are morning, evening and meal times. We pray for ourselves, for our families and friends, for our leaders, for the Church and for the world.

3. **Fasting.** Fasting means cutting down on the amount and richness of our food and drink. Done as a penance for sin it helps us to pray better. The money we save on food should be given in alms.

4. **Doing good works.** We are to help Jesus and come to his aid by helping other people in a spirit of love and goodness. Jesus went about doing good, so should we.

5. **Giving alms.** We give alms to help God's poor. We give cheerfully to God who has given us all we have.

6. **Abstinence.** This form of penance entails giving up some desirable food or drink on one or two days a week in Lent. Our abstinence is another way of sharing Christ's work of saving the world.

7. **Carrying out our duties of state.** This is perhaps the hardest and most unrecognised form of penance. We serve God by being a good mother, father, spouse, son, daughter, teacher, worker, student, priest.

8. **Meditative reading.** Reading Christian books, newspapers and magazines to help us in our faith and right living.

9. **Controlling our desires for possessions.** Jesus reminds us that our heart will be wherever our treasure is, and to build up treasure for ourselves in heaven rather than on earth.

10. **Controlling our desire for entertainment.** Too much entertainment - by radio, TV, films, spectator sports, light reading, distractions - can dull our taste for the things of God, and lead us to have no time for the works of the Lord. When you watch T.V. or listen to the radio, ask yourself: is this uplifting my spirit, or is it taking my spirit away?

*Quotation from St Augustine:*

***Those who allow themselves to have everything they want and do everything they want, will very soon have things they shouldn't have and do things they shouldn't do.***