

LENT begins this week with Ash Wednesday, and is the forty days of spiritual renewal to prepare us for the Holy Spirit to renew in us the risen life of Christ at Easter, when with lighted candles we all repeat the covenant promises made at our baptism. Lent is the Christian springtime, and its name is from the Anglo-Saxon word for Spring (referring to the *lengthening* time of daylight), which helps our understanding of the meaning and purpose of Lent in the Church's year. Like so much of the Church's annual calendar, the annual seasonal cycle of sunlight is reflected as the light of Christ in the spiritual life of the Church. So we are called to understand the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the Church during Lent as the spiritual parallel of the springtime struggle of the natural world to burst forth in leaf and flower in spring, as we prepare for the Easter resurrection of Christ. As both Lent and Easter are moveable celebrations in the Church's calendar, just as the spring season also moves, sometimes earlier and sometimes later in the natural world, the parallel can never be exact. Our prayers for the renewal of the whole Church are especially important at this time - and perhaps especially important this year.

But how we actually renew our spiritual lives is always personal for each one of us, depending on our circumstances. Attending Mass and receiving the Lenten ashes on Ash Wednesday is voluntary, because the Church recognises that spiritual renewal is something every Christian has to choose for himself or herself - and must include the desire to seek God's healing forgiveness, a desire formally expressed in the Church through the sacrament of reconciliation in confession with, essentially, heartfelt signs of seeking a change of life in ourselves. The ashes on Ash Wednesday express our acceptance of our own mortality and an acceptance that only the Spirit of God working within us can by our love and humility, really bring us the salvation for which we seek and hope. All the Church can do, Sunday by Sunday during Lent, is to set a gradually unfolding spiritual context by its readings and practices week by week, offering token activities to invite us to reflect more deeply on the ways found by saints and many others to help them in the course of their Christian spiritual renewal. Its context is set next Sunday, when we read of Jesus' own journey into the desert to be confronted by his personal temptations, the secular temptations each one of us finds we have - with an awareness that everything in this world will inevitably pass away in the course of our lives. Our conversion involves a recognition of the ultimate emptiness of every secular ambition and value, and the faith and hope that we are here for something much more than this.