

Six Ways to Evangelize During Lent

During Lent, when your friends or co-workers express curiosity about Catholic customs and symbolism, use those moments as opportunities to evangelize! Following are six common questions Catholics hear during Lent and some evangelizing answers.

Ash Wednesday:

What's with that dirt on your head?

Who hasn't gotten that question on Ash Wednesday before? Do you feel silly when people ask you about your ashes? And is it hard to answer their questions? Having ashes on your forehead isn't just some weird Catholic thing; it's a tradition that finds its roots in the Old Testament. "I turned to the Lord God, to seek help, in prayer and petition, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes" (Dn 9:3). When the ashes are placed on our foreheads in the sign of the Cross, it is a reminder of several things. First, it is a call to repentance: a physical sign that we are sinners in need of forgiveness, which is how the prophets used it in the Old Testament. Second, it is to remind us that God created us from the earth and when we die, we will return to it. But here's the best part: As Pope Benedict XVI has said, "Man is dust and to dust he shall return, but dust is precious in God's eyes because God created man, destining him to immortality" (Ash Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2010). God so loves us that, even when our bodies return to the dust, our souls are meant to live forever with him. The ashes symbolize all of this.



Not so silly anymore, is it?

Abstinence:

So why aren't you eating pepperoni pizza on Friday?

You love pepperoni pizza. You eat it all the time. Suddenly, you can't have it on Fridays?! What could

possibly be going on? It must be that Catholic thing, again. Absolutely! On Fridays during Lent, we particularly remember the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. In memory of this great sacrifice, we continue the tradition of penance and sacrifice—abstaining from meat on Fridays is an outward manifestation of an interior reality: the conversion of our hearts. As Pope John Paul II has said, "In fact, the external aspects of fasting, though important, do not convey the full measure of the practice. Joined to the practice should be a sincere desire for inner purification, readiness to obey the divine will and thoughtful solidarity with our brothers and sisters, especially the very poor" (Ash Wednesday, Mar. 5, 2013). Christ himself fasted and prayed in the desert. Through fasting and praying, we unite ourselves with the sacrifice of Christ and offer him reparation for our sins and failings. It's a little thing to give him in the face of his ultimate sacrifice, but what a grace that our God accepts and loves little gifts!

External Sacrifice:

So why exactly are you not eating candy for the next month?

This is a very popular penance during Lent, and the questions about it are just as popular. Heaven forbid you should avoid the cake at the birthday party! You LOVE cake! But it's Lent—a time for penance and sacrifice. Christ has said, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). Giving up something we enjoy strengthens our love for Christ and our resilience against temptation. As Pope Benedict XVI said in his Lenten address of 2009, "Through fasting and praying, we allow [Christ] to come and satisfy the deepest hunger that we experience in the depths of our being: the

hunger and thirst for God.” It unites us with Christ’s own sacrifices and gives us a deeper appreciation of the blessings in our lives.

External Sacrifice vs. Internal Conversion:

I don’t get it—all you do is give up candy?

Now, here is an interesting question. External sacrifices are the most obvious kind, so sometimes it does look like all we do is avoid chocolate. However, if you look closer, you’ll realize that fasting and abstinence have always gone hand in hand with two of their best friends: prayer and almsgiving. External sacrifice is a manifestation of interior conversion: “interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance” (CCC, no. 1430). Interior conversion is where prayer and almsgiving come into play. In almsgiving, we show mercy and generosity to others, giving them a chance to experience the blessings we have. In prayer, we are communicating with God, asking him to bless and perfect our fasting and almsgiving: “prayer is the living relationship of the children of God with their Father who is good beyond measure, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit” (CCC, no. 2565). It’s not just avoiding sweets. It’s glorifying God by growing in his Love.

Palm Sunday and Symbolism:

Why are you carrying around tree branches?

Sometimes, one of the hardest things to explain as a Catholic is our attachment to symbolism. Palm Sunday is a great example of that. We come home from Mass holding palm branches, and we tuck them behind a crucifix or next to the picture of the Last Supper. To anyone who does not know our faith, it looks as though we stuck a few weeds on the wall . . . imagine their questions! The truth behind this tradition, however, goes to the story of Palm Sunday, when the people heard that Christ was coming, and “they took palm branches and went out to meet him, and cried out ‘Hosanna! / Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, / [even] the

king of Israel’” (Jn 12:13). It was a tradition to spread palms before a king as he processed into his city. It was a way to welcome him, to show him glory and homage. Thus, Christ, the true King, was welcomed into Jerusalem. This fulfilled the prophecy in the Old Testament, which declared, “Behold: your king is coming to you, / a just savior is he, / humble and riding on a donkey” (Zech 9:9). It revealed that Christ was a great king but also a humble king. The people greeted him with wild joy and cheers of Hosanna. But one short week later, they crucified him. We celebrate this feast and carry palm branches home with us to commemorate the great humility of Our Lord, who loved us so much that he chose the Cross for our salvation.

Observing Good Friday vs. Opening Day:

So, why can’t you go to the baseball opener on Friday?

In some years, Good Friday occurs on the same day major league baseball teams have their “opening day” celebrations with games usually starting at 3:05 p.m. While everyone else is heading to the stands, eager for hot dogs and home runs, all those Catholics are walking quietly toward churches. Why?? Because at three o’clock on a Friday, on a hillside called Calvary, the Savior of the world took his last breath. All for love of us. “It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’; and when he had said this he breathed his last” (Lk 23:44-46). At 3 p.m. on Good Friday, we take the time to reflect on what Christ has done for us, not only by fasting, but also by the various devotions that our churches offer: veneration of the cross, the reading of the Passion and the Stations of the Cross. On Good Friday, we spend our afternoon walking with Christ to Calvary, immersed in his love and mercy . . . and that beats any baseball game, any time.

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