

Ashes mark start of our season to get ready

We begin the season of Lent with Ash Wednesday on Feb. 14, only a few weeks after our celebration of the Christmas season. That's early, so we may feel that we are not "ready" yet.

Ash Wednesday is generally considered to be one of the

busy days in the liturgical year. Even though the Church doesn't demand that we come to Mass on Ash Wednesday, churches are always filled on that day, likely due to the distribution of ashes.

The large attendance at Masses is good news to the Church

as the faithful come together in the presence of God to acknowledge the call to return to Him "the aged, children, brides and bridegrooms, priests and ministers" (see Joel 2:12-18).

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of our own faith journey in Lent, 40 days to prepare spiritually to celebrate the glorious feast of Easter. On Ash Wednesday, there is no doubt that there is a great deal of enthusiasm to begin Lent as we proudly wear the ashes on our foreheads throughout the day.

To understand the spiritual meaning of Lent, it is important to reflect on the words of the minister when we receive the ashes: either "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" or "Repent and believe in the Gospel."

These words form the heart of our Lenten discipline, reminding us of our mortal nature, weakness and brokenness and also of our call to return to the Lord with heart renewed.

One thing that has become familiar to us is that we associate Lent with austerity, meaning we plan to give up something pleasurable. The popular choice is to abstain from rich foods such as chocolates and other sweets.

Many people think that abstaining can be the hallmark for a "successful" Lenten discipline. This year some people may be pondering what to do about what some describe as a collision between Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day, a day on which chocolates and sweets abound. Finding room for both abstinence and in-



Ash Wednesday reminds us of our "mortal nature." (CNS photo/James Ramos)



FR. YAW ACHEAMPONG

dulgence need not be impossible. Couples can alter their plans.

The Ash Wednesday celebration actually offers couples the opportunity to reflect on the love from the heart of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Reflecting on "the love that has been poured into our hearts" (Romans 5:5) can be a starting point of Lenten discipline for couples to live out their love in Lent.

Of course, Lent is much more

than abstinence, and any Lenten discipline we choose to undertake should be from our heart: it should help us reflect on where we are in our relationship with God and with neighbour.

Our Lenten discipline also requires that we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit to lead us to grow spiritually. When we strive to journey through Lent pondering spiritual things and with trust in the Lord, our Lenten discipline may help us experience the love and mercy of God in our lives and in the lives of others.

By the end of the season, hopefully we will have made some significant changes in our spiritual lives. It is then that we will be "ready" to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord.

(Fr. Acheampong is pastor at Our Lady of Peace Parish in Toronto.)

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