

Positively the season

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Ashes and sackcloth were at one time in the church the mark of an individual doing public penance for serious sin, explained Jesuit Father Lawrence Madden.

The director of the Georgetown Center for Liturgy, Spirituality and the Arts in Washington, D.C., he was discussing the origins of Ash Wednesday and Lenten customs.

The church once required a public penitent to don sackcloth and to be marked with ashes in a public ceremony at the beginning of Lent, Father Madden continued. Then the penitent was escorted to the door and expelled physically from the church for the duration of Lent.

It was only at the Synod of Benevento in 1091 that Pope Urban II recommended that ashes be used by all Christians as a sign of penitence, Father Madden added. The pope suggested that clerics and laymen have ashes sprinkled on their heads while women have a cross of ashes placed on their foreheads.

The custom lives on today in the church's Ash Wednesday celebration. Often the ashes come from burning palms blessed the previous year.

And judging by the numbers who regularly turn out for services on Ash Wednesday, the custom still holds powerful significance, observed Paul Covino, associate director of the Georgetown center. He and Father Madden are staff members at Holy Trinity Parish.

During Lent, the focus at Holy Trinity is on "making a retreat theme practical in people's lives," Covino said. "It's a time for quiet prayer and meditation."

Lent is a "time for serious reflection on the gift God gave us in Christ," Father Madden said. He added that this focus comes from a Lenten scripture reading which portrays Jesus going off to the desert to think, to meditate.

At Holy Trinity, Covino said, parish groups are encouraged "to cut down on public activities," to alter their frantic pace in order that Lent might be practiced more quietly at home and in church.

Each year the parish liturgy team puts together a Lenten booklet. It is an effort to help people "revisit aspects of (their) relationship with God, the community and with individuals."

To help parishioners get in the proper frame of mind for the season, the booklet contains historical background on Lent and

a schedule of special Lenten services — for example, a retreat, a penance service for adults and another for families, Vespers and Morning Prayer services.

The booklet stresses "home-oriented activities" which can help individuals and families reflect on what conversion is all about, said Father Madden.

The message of the death and resurrection of Jesus is a message of hope, the priest said. Both Father Madden and Covino look upon Lent as a "happy season." It celebrates the mystery of the "reconciliation of the world with God," Covino said.

Asked what Lenten practices he recommends to people, Covino said he encourages them "to do something positive" for Lent. Discipline is important, he added, in the sense of doing something regularly during Lent. But the accent needn't be negative.

Almsgiving, for example, can mean giving time as well as money, he noted. With that in mind, parish teen-agers may undertake a service project, giving time each week to help others — perhaps through serving at a soup kitchen for the poor.

Doing something positive might mean "giving five minutes a day to prayer," Father Madden suggested.

But it also might mean seeing "what can be done about improving family relationships."

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)



When you need to call time out

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

One day Jesus rose early in the morning. It was after a particularly busy day and he must have felt the need to get away and think things over (Mark 1:35).

His absence disturbed the disciples. They could not understand why he would go off like this at a time when the crowds were so enthusiastic about his healings.

So "Simon and his companions managed to track him down, and when they found him, they told him, 'Everybody is looking for you'" (Mark 1:36-37).

But Jesus was not trying to win a popularity contest. He was intent on one thing: establishing God's reign, a victory over the forces of evil.

However, he probably found the acclaim of the people exciting.

He needed to get away for a while to reflect prayerfully on his purpose.

Everyone has to get away from time to time and sort out the pieces of life. Lent is one of those times when there is an incentive for people to take time out and get their heads on straight.

Jesus realized the importance of this not only for himself but for his disciples too. Once he sent the disciples out on a trial mission to Galilee's villages. "They went off, preaching the need of repentance. They expelled many demons, anointed the sick with oil and worked many cures" (Mark 6:12-13).

The disciple's success must have exhilarated them, made them eager to take on the whole world. But when they came back and reported to Jesus, he said: "Come by yourselves to an out-of-the-way

place and rest a little" (Mark 6:31).

All activity, successful or unsuccessful, has to be kept in proper perspective. Why are we doing it? How does it fit in with the overall purpose of our lives? To find answers to those all-important questions, quiet inactivity is needed — time and space for serious, prayerful thought.

This would seem to be a response to St. Paul's plea: "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may judge what is God's will, what is good, pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:1-2).

It is significant that Paul then points out some of the practical results of this "renewal of your mind." All his examples have to do with positive, mutual sharing. It reminds me of what was written in the book of Isaiah when the Jews had gone on a