

Lenten journey begins



Pope Benedict XVI blesses the crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square during his Angelus address, delivered from his apartment window at the Vatican March 5. He began his Lenten retreat later that day. (CNS photo/Reuters)



Msgr. Gregory Gier, rector of Holy Family Cathedral, places ashes for the faithful seated on the south side of the Cathedral.

More than 1 billion Catholics began the journey of Lent March 1, flocking to grand Cathedrals and makeshift churches for Ash Wednesday and continuing their Lenten journey in a variety of ways.

In the Diocese of Tulsa, parishes are sponsoring Stations of the Cross, staging missions, bringing in speakers and gathering for communal meals.

The call to observe Lent means fasting, contemplation and works of service. After the blow-out of Fat Tuesday, the next 44 days, including Sundays, are devoted to individual and parish preparation for Easter.

Baptisms are discouraged during Lent; schools and youth groups try not to schedule festive activities. The color of the season is purple.

In Rome, Pope Benedict XVI began his first Lent as the bishop of Rome, both receiving and giving ashes on Ash Wednesday. On March 5, he began a six-day retreat, an experience he recommends to all Catholics, citing the ancient Israelites who wandered in the desert and Jesus who retreated to the desert before beginning his public ministry.

The pontiff said a period of withdrawal and face-to-face confrontation with temptation strengthens one's faith.

On Ash Wednesday, Pope Benedict XVI's homily included these words:

"Every day, but particularly in Lent, Christians must face a struggle, like the one that Christ underwent in the desert of Judea, where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil, and then in Gethsemane, when he rejected the most severe temptation, accepting the Father's will to the very end.

"It is a spiritual battle waged against sin and finally, against Satan. It is a struggle that involves the whole of the person and demands attentive and constant watchfulness. ...

"Lent reminds us, therefore, that Christian life is a never-ending combat in which the 'weapons' of prayer, fasting and penance are used. Fighting against evil, against every form of selfishness and hate, and dying to oneself to live in God is the ascetic journey that every disciple of Jesus is called to make with humility and patience, with generosity and perseverance."



An altar server receives ashes from Bishop Thomas J. Rodi at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral in Biloxi, Miss. (CNS photo)



Standing room only

As is typical on Ash Wednesdays, the faithful who came to Holy Family Cathedral for noon Mass on March 1 filled every pew, and many people had to stand as Bishop Edward J. Slattery and other priests and deacons of the Diocese of Tulsa applied a cross to hundreds of foreheads. "Everybody goes to church on Ash Wednesday to get ashes," Bishop Edward J. Slattery later said, saying the tradition is "deeply imbedded in the Catholic identity." Although Ash Wednesday is not a holy day of obligation, many Catholics – even those who don't attend Mass or accept communion – tend to show up.



Pope Benedict XVI distributes ashes to a cardinal March 1.

Pope takes week-long retreat

VATICAN CITY (CNS) - As he prepared to begin his weeklong Lenten retreat, Pope Benedict XVI said Lent is a time to examine one's life in an atmosphere of prayer and repentance.

Citing the ancient Israelites who wandered in the desert and Jesus who retreated to the desert before beginning his public ministry, the pope said a period of withdrawal and face-to-face confrontation with temptation strengthens one's faith.

Before leading the midday Angelus address March 5, the pope said his March 5-11 Lenten retreat "will help me and my collaborators in the Roman Curia to enter into this characteristic Lenten climate with greater awareness."

Meditating on biblical desert scenes, he said, "We understand that in order to fully realize our lives in freedom, the trial that freedom itself brings, that is, temptation, must be overcome."

"Only freed from the slavery of falsehood and sin thanks to obedience to the faith that opens him to the truth can the human person find the full meaning of his existence and obtain peace, love and joy," the pope said.

He asked Catholics to pray for him and top Vatican officials while they were on retreat, and he promised to keep everyone in his own prayers.

The retreat, which includes formal prayer, spiritual lectures and eucharistic adoration, includes morning and late-afternoon sessions.

Pope Benedict asked 80-year-old retired Cardinal Marco Ce of Venice, Italy, to preach the retreat.

The cardinal chose to use the Gospel of Mark as the basis for his series of talks on "Walking Toward Easter With Jesus."

A few hours before the retreat began, Vatican Radio asked Cardinal Ce how he felt about being asked to preach for the pope.

The cardinal answered that he felt "Great trepidation ... this possibility never entered my mind. I struggled with making a decision, but in the end I accepted, trusting in the help of the good God."



A Filipino nun places ashes on the forehead of a child at a Catholic church in Manila, Philippines, on Ash Wednesday. (CNS photo/Reuters)

Members of the traveling drama troupe from St. John Church in McAlester will be performing the Stations of the Cross at several churches in the Diocese of Tulsa during Lent. The group performed for Holy Ghost Church in Hartshorne and will appear at 7 p.m. March 24 at Church of the Madalene. They will be back in McAlester on Palm Sunday. Father Leonard Higgins directs the group. From left are Bryan Stubbs, Rachel Basinger, Beth Willis and Jesse Whitmore holding up Danny O'Houlahan as Jesus

