

Lenten Family Celebration

(Ash Wednesday or early in the Lenten Season)

Ash Wednesday can be a special day for family ritual. Begin by creating some kind of Lenten shrine or centerpiece that stays in a prominent area of the living space of the family.

In one family, a child used a large round tray and divided it into pie-shaped sections. One was filled with cinnamon sugar to symbolize the desert into which Jesus went out to pray. Another held a small crown of thorns made of rose branches. Others held a cross, a little lamb, a towel bearing an image of Jesus' face and a little mound of ashes. This was a convenient centerpiece because it could easily be moved from place to place for subsequent weekly Lenten rituals.

Another possibility is a shoebox tableaux of the type children make at school. It might depict the Stations of the Cross drawn around the inside (little hands can do that—adult hands can't) with the empty tomb made of clay on the base of the box. This idea is effective as well as portable.

Although the word shrine is not used frequently today, that is essentially what these centerpieces are. In today's language, the word centerpiece is preferred over shrine. We talk about centerpieces for our parties and other celebrations, so why not for a religious ritual? Fashioning the centerpiece can be a prayer in itself for the child and/or family. It's great fun for children to sit with parents and create something that is actually going to be used in a celebration. Parents should not simply delegate the task to children; they should be ready to help plan it and create it if invited.

Ask family members to clear the evening of Ash Wednesday for a "Beginning of Lent" celebration. Talk about the centerpiece, ask for volunteers to create one, and offer to help. If more than one child volunteers, suggest that they unite efforts or ask each to create something. If the result is two, three or more centerpieces, display them in various places and alternate using them during the 40 days of Lent.

The Celebration

Opening Song

After dinner cleanup on Ash Wednesday, gather family members around the Lenten centerpiece at the dining room table and open with a Lenten song.

Scripture

Read Isaiah 58:1-11, a beautiful passage which tells us that true fasting involves us in changing our hearts and in changing the structures that hurt people and treat them unjustly.

Family Discussion

Discuss Lent: what it means and how it came to be observed. Here are some of the highlights to cover:

- Lent means “spring,” and it goes back to the early Church when the new Christians-to-be were preparing to be baptized on Easter. They were called catechumens and, during the 40 days prior to Easter, they repented, studied and sacrificed.
- When infant Baptism became common, Lent became a time of repentance and renewal for all Christians. It taps the rich symbolism of the Old Testament when the Jews were waiting for their Savior. Passover, which we observe on Holy Thursday, set the stage for the Mass.
- The 40 days, of course, came from Jesus' going out into the desert for 40 days before he began his public ministry.
- The custom of ashes comes from the old form of penance where the person publicly wore sack-cloth (a cheap, uncomfortable shirt) and rubbed ashes all over to show repentance for some sin.

Family Resolutions

Give concrete expression to Lenten resolutions by making a “Lenten chain.” Pass out strips of white paper, about one by six inches in size, two to each person. Discuss what the family can do as a family to renew itself (see list of suggestions below). Decide on five items for the first week and staple them into a Lenten chain. Each family member decides on a personal pledge of renewal and adds that to the chain, which is then draped around the centerpiece. Repeat this ritual each week, adding links to the chain so that by Good Friday the chain has grown to 40+ links. (Instead of the chain, some families make a large cross and tape pledges to it. Others fashion a Lenten calendar).

Here is a sampling of the kind of pledges for family and personal renewal that might appear on a Lenten chain:

- Examine and adjust eating patterns, e.g., giving up a certain food or drink one day a week, fasting.
- Dedicate time to service involvements during Lent, e.g., working at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter, helping people in your neighborhood like the elderly.
- Increase sacramental involvement, e.g., go to Mass as a family once during the week, participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation through individual confession or a parish Reconciliation Service.
- Participate as a family in the Stations of the Cross in the parish.
- Find time to read the Bible together as a family for 15 minutes daily. Read one spiritual book privately during Lent. Meditate 15 minutes a day.
- Set aside one evening each week just for family togetherness with no TV, only family activities.

Silent Ending

End in silence. It is a somber but appropriate tone with which to start Lent. Give a pretzel to each person as he or she leaves. This is a Lenten symbol, originally made of water, flour and slate in the form of arms crossed in prayer. The Latin word *brachium*, from which pretzel is derived, means “arm.” Ask each family member to put the Ash Wednesday pretzel in a prominent place in his or her own room as a reminder of Lent.