



## Lenten Reflection: Ashes, Fasting, Fish and Climate Change

We begin Lent marked with ashes, the ancient and visible sign of repentance and mourning.

The ashes call us to a change of heart, to new ways of living, thinking and acting — to conversion. Pope Benedict tells us: “To be converted means to change direction — not for a slight adjustment, but a true and total change of direction. Conversion is to go against the current, where the “current” is a superficial lifestyle, inconsistent and illusory.”

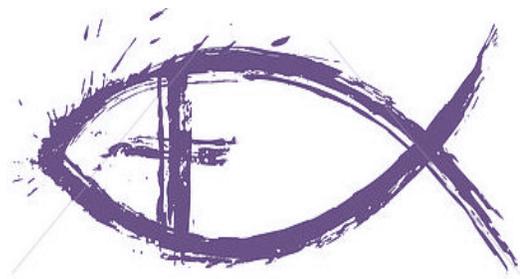
A major illusion of our current lifestyle is that we are independent of the rest of God’s creation and can treat it as we wish. These ashes remind us that we are **part of** God’s creation. We are dust from dust, carbon-based life made from the earth, from elements created by exploding stars as the universe unfolded at God’s command.

Carbon combines easily with many other elements to make possible the diversity of biological life on which we depend. Other creatures sustain our lives and, when we die, our bodies return to the earth, the elements are recycled to continue to processes of life.

The ashes on our foreheads are a sign of our *humility* [from the same root word as *human* and *humus* - soil] and of our need to re-establish right relationship with other creatures and with God. We are **the one creature** created in the image of God, who can speak for creation in giving God praise and thanks. We are **the one creature** called to “till and tend” the garden [Gen. 2:15], to be responsible stewards of the earth.

Our ashes call us to repentance for the particular ways in which our relationship to creation needs healing. Damaging, wasting and polluting the gifts of creation bring harm to our neighbors and our children, and impoverishes future generations. The direct and inseparable links between care for creation and care of the poor is summed up in the Church’s teaching on the need for “Environmental Justice.” Those who have the least share of the world’s goods are too often those who suffer first and most from environmental harm.

The Church calls us to fast during Lent. Throughout much of the world, living on less is not just a Lenten



practice but a daily fact of life. Fasting links us with the poor, who suffer and die from lack of food and clean water, from breathing polluted air.



The Church asks us to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and on the Fridays of Lent. This can serve to increase our awareness of the environmental costs of our typical meat-focused diet, which depends on heavy use of energy, fertilizers, grain and water.

In the old days, Catholics abstained from meat **every** Friday and often ate fish. But today, this wonderful gift of creation is declining around the world due to overfishing, coastal pollution, oil spills, habitat destruction, and warmer oceans. And, as the oceans absorb increasing amounts of CO<sup>2</sup>, the water becomes more acid. This reduces the ability of sea creatures — from the plankton at the base of the ocean food web to corals to oysters — to form shells and skeletons. Reducing CO<sup>2</sup> emissions is essential to protecting the future of sea life.

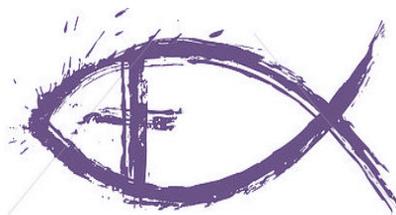
In many places, including Connecticut, some fish are unsafe for pregnant women and small children to eat, due to contamination from toxic wastes and air-borne mercury from coal. Around the world, small and subsistence fishermen can no longer catch the only source of animal protein for their families, due to overharvesting by technologically advanced fleets.

The carbonized dust that marks our foreheads can make us more aware of the need to change habits and policies that contribute to global climate change. As the Church around the world has been witnessing, the poorest people in developing countries are first to suffer and the hardest hit by the floods and droughts as the Earth grows warmer. Our Lenten Fast can include reducing our use of energy and advocating for policies that help the poor to adapt.

[See [www.catholicclimatecovenant.org](http://www.catholicclimatecovenant.org), [www.lent4.5.org](http://www.lent4.5.org), [www.franciscanaction.org](http://www.franciscanaction.org) ]

Lent offers us the opportunity to prayerfully re-examine our actions and whether they bring us nearer to--or separate us from-- God, our sisters and brothers, and the rest of creation. How must we change our lifestyles and habits, so others are fed and God's creation remains life-giving? It is time to turn back to God and forsake the foolish ways we have been treating creation and God's poor.

[See [www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/cr\\_seafoodwatch/issues](http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/cr_seafoodwatch/issues), and [www.pmel.noaa/co2/OA](http://www.pmel.noaa/co2/OA) for fisheries and ocean acidification information.]



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