

Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday: 9 things to do with your family

Once they've made a [pray/fast/give Lent plan](#), printed out [the USCCB Lent calendar](#), and downloaded the [Catholic Relief Services Rice Bowl App](#), your kids are ready to celebrate Shrove Tuesday—and mark Ash Wednesday in a meaningful way. Here are nine things to do, and resources to help you along the way.

What to do for Shrove (or Fat) Tuesday

Shrove Tuesday comes from an old English word meaning “to confess,” since it was customary to go to confession before the beginning of Lent. It was also customary to use up meats, fats, and dairy products before entering the Lenten period of fasting; this led to the day's nicknames: Mardi Gras (French for *Fat Tuesday*) or Pancake Tuesday.

Here are some ideas for celebrating Shrove Tuesday:

1. Go to Confession

Go to confession. You'll probably want to do this on the Saturday before Ash Wednesday, unless you can find confession locally on Tuesday. Haven't been in a while? Check out [Celebrating Reconciliation with Kids: 9 Ways to Get Into the Habit](#) and [Help Kids Prepare for Confession with an Examination of Conscience](#). And here's [an Examination of Conscience for the Whole Family](#), from the [Catholic Family Book of Prayers](#).

2. Eat sweet and fatty food

Eat lots of good, fatty food in preparation for your Lenten

fast!

- Catholic Cuisine offers a host of traditional recipes for Shrove Tuesday, including a “quick and easy” [King Cake](#), [Shrove Tuesday pancakes](#), [Mardi Gras beignets](#), and what is billed as a “[pre-Ash Wednesday Dust Cake](#),” actually a variation of a dirt cake that you can tie into Ash Wednesday ashes.
- Or head over to the BBC’s Good Food show for three quick and easy (but delicious!) variations on [pancakes for Shrove Tuesday](#).
- If you’re really ambitious, try making Polish [paczkis](#), a sort of donut that is traditionally made on Shrove Tuesday in Poland.

3. Pancake races!

Pancakes are a central feature of many Shrove Tuesday celebrations—so much so that the day is known as Pancake Day or Pancake Tuesday in many Commonwealth countries. Pancakes were an easy and quick way to use up dairy goods before the beginning of Lent (from back in the days when all animal products were forfeited during Lent). Somewhere along the line, someone attached special significance to the ingredients: eggs represent creation; flour, human work; salt, wholesomeness; and milk for purity.

Besides eating pancakes, you can hold pancake races with your kids. This continues to be a popular tradition throughout Europe, especially in Great Britain, where the races are communal events. [Participants race while holding a skillet and simultaneously flipping a pancake.](#)

4. Have a Mardi Gras celebration

Mardi Gras and Carnival celebrations are hugely popular around the world. Even if you don’t live in a community that sponsors

a family-friendly Mardi Gras celebration, you can give a nod to the festivities by holding your own little celebration at home:

- ring bells (echoing the tradition of ringing church bells on Shrove Tuesday)
- have a parade
- dance!
- dress up in masks and costumes; you can purchase these at your local dollar store, or have kids make their own.

5. Hide the Alleluia

In recognition of the fact that the Church doesn't sing or say the word *alleluia* until the Easter Vigil, many families hold an informal "burying the alleluia" ritual on Shrove Tuesday. Elizabeth over at [In the Heart of My Home](#) painted a wooden *alleluia* that she hides every year. Or you can just burying or hiding a printed *alleluia*.

- Download, print, color, and then hide our [alleluia](#) sign.

What to do for Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, and although it is not one of the Church's holy days of obligation, it might as well be, given its popularity. Here are some ways to observe the day with your kids:

1. Get ashes (obviously)

Attend your parish's Ash Wednesday service with your kids, preferably in the morning so that they can wear them throughout the day as a public witness to their faith (unless doing so makes them uncomfortable).

If you have time, [preview the Scriptures for the day](#) with your kids, and give them a heads up on what will happen during the imposition of the ashes. The minister will say one of two things while imposing the ashes:

You are dust and unto dust you shall return.

or

Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.

If some members of your household can't make it to the Ash Wednesday service, ask your pastor for some ashes to take home—it's actually traditional. [Anyone, even non-Christians, can receive ashes.](#)

In recent years, many Catholics have posted selfies on Ash Wednesday with the hashtag #AshTag; the U.S. Catholic bishops even sponsored a contest around the practice. Predictably, this led to a bit of a backlash against the practice; [this article from The Compass](#) does a great job of weighing the pros and cons.

2. Fast

Ash Wednesday is a day for fasting and abstinence from meat. Young kids are exempt, but you can still keep meals and snacks simple to help them get into the spirit of the season. You can find out all the ins and outs of who must fast and abstain, and what that looks like, at the USCCB [Fast & Abstinence](#) page.

Kids aren't required to fast on Ash Wednesday, but you can find "soft" ways to help them observe the day: no sweets, no special snacks, and plain food for meals. Teach them the practice of offering up their sacrifice for a prayerful purpose, such as the thousands of children who die from malnutrition every day

3. Burn your old palm branches

If you kept your palm branches from last year's Palm Sunday service, Ash Wednesday is a traditional day to burn and bury them, a ritual accompanied by a [simple prayer service](#).

4. Get your purple on

If you keep a prayer corner or [home oratory](#), now is the time to change things up. Put a purple cloth on your prayer table, set out appropriate symbols of the season, and put out Lenten prayer resources. Get your kids to help with the decorating, and it will become a way to teach them about the meaning of Lent.