

The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults

Lent

by Fr. Antony

The Lenten season preceding Easter goes back to the time of the Apostles, but the length of time has varied. From the earliest times, it was customary for Christians in most places to fast before Easter. At first this was a 2-day fast (Friday and Saturday). As time passed, this fast was extended to a week. But by the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.), which was the first general council of the Church, Lent was to be observed for forty days. We also find the early “Church Fathers” like St. Athanasius (373), St. Cyril of Jerusalem (386), St. Cyril of Alexandria (444) emphasizing the 40-day period of fasting.

The number forty has a biblical background, with special spiritual significance regarding preparation. On Mount Sinai, “Moses stayed there with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights, without eating any food or drinking any water” preparing to receive the Ten Commandments (**Ex 34:28**). Elijah walked “40 days and 40 nights” to the mountain of the Lord, Mount Horeb (**I Kgs 19:8**). In the story of Noah’s ark, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. The Israelites wandered around the desert for 40 years. Most importantly, Jesus fasted and prayed for “40 days and 40 nights” in the desert before He began His public ministry (**Mt 4:2**).

The season begins with Ash Wednesday, when priests mark the foreheads of Christians with ashes as a reminder that we are created from dust and to dust we shall return. In the Roman Catholic Church, and many other Christian denominations, Maundy Thursday (also called Holy Thursday), Good Friday, and Holy Saturday form the Easter Triduum, rather than being part of Lent.

Lent is actually 46 days rather than 40 days; Sundays are not included in the 40 day count because every Sunday is a joyful celebration of our Lord’s resurrection. So, each Sunday we suspend our Lenten disciplines. During Lent, Christians meditate with awe and thanksgiving on the great paschal mystery -- the salvation God offers to us sinners through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Eastern Church does not skip over Sundays when calculating the length of the Great Lent. Therefore, the Great Lent always begins on Clean Monday.

Lent means “springtime.” People view spring as a time of growth, a period when new life emerges from the deathlike state of winter. Hence the name, this theme of death and rebirth plays a vital role in the Lenten journey. During the early days of the Church; the observance of fast was very strict. One meal was allowed per day and, even in that meal, meat and fish were forbidden. The rules of fasting varied. First, some areas of the Church abstained from all forms of meat and animal products, while others made exceptions for foods like fish.

The present fasting and abstinence laws are very simple: On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, the faithful fast (having only one full meal a day and smaller snacks to keep up one’s strength) and abstain from meat; on the other Fridays of Lent, the faithful abstain from meat. People are still encouraged “to give up something” for Lent as a sacrifice. In the Eastern Churches, even today, they abstain from animal products and fish and egg.

Lent reminds us of two things: it recalls baptism, and it is the time to renew our baptismal promises, when Jesus washed away our sins, giving us newness of life to celebrate the glory of Easter. It is also the time for preparation for baptism. It was a time of instruction and preparation for the catechumens (non-Christians) who wanted to become members of the Church. During Lent, they were taught the Christian doctrines, and they were led step by step through prayer and special rites toward baptism. They were baptized and accepted on Easter Eve (the Easter Vigil).

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican Council II stated, “The two elements which are especially characteristic of Lent — the recalling of baptism, or the preparation for it, and penance — should be given greater emphasis in the liturgy and in liturgical catechesis. It is by means of them that the Church prepares the faithful for the celebration of Easter, while they hear God’s word more frequently and devote more time to prayer” (no. 109). Lent evolved also as a period of penance for public sinners, and for those who wanted re-admittance to the church. Over recent years, the baptismal element has been restored to Lent as the RCIA is celebrated in parishes.

During the season of Lent, the Church encourages the faithful to do spiritual works, like attending Mass, attending or making the Stations of the Cross, making a weekly holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament, taking time for personal prayer and spiritual reading (especially Scripture) and most especially making a good confession and receiving sacramental absolution. Prayer, almsgiving and fasting are the three traditional practices of the Church.

The color used in the sanctuary for most of Lent is purple, red violet, or dark violet. Some churches avoid the use of any flowers in the sanctuary during Lent, but decorate using various dried materials. These colors symbolize both the pain and suffering leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus as well as the suffering of humanity and the world under sin. But purple is also the color of royalty, and so anticipates, through the suffering and death of Jesus, the coming resurrection and hope of newness that will be celebrated in the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.