

Catholic Customs and Traditions

Understanding Lent

Meaning and Intention of “Lent”

- Lent is closely related with the transition from winter to spring. The word “Lent”, comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for springtime, *lencten*. It describes the gradual *lengthening* of daylight after the winter solstice.
- From ancient times, fasting was a natural thing to do in preparing for the holiest of times.
- 2nd cent, ⇒ Xns prepared for Easter, by fasting for two days;
3rd cent, ⇒ the fast was extended to all of Holy Week;
4th cent, ⇒ a distinct and lengthy season of preparation was recorded.
- Intention was to imitate Jesus who after his baptism in the Jordan fasted for 40 days (**Mt 4:2; Lk 4:1-2**).

Forty Days

- In early Christianity the discipline of fasting became associated with the number ‘40’. This eventually led to the determined length for Lent.

Why the number “40”?

- Fasting by catechumens and then by other Christians was done to imitate Jesus’ forty days in the desert (**Mt 4:2**).
- The Church Fathers saw the echo of the 40 days Moses fasted on Mt Sinai (**Ex 34:28**); and the 40 days Elijah fasted on his journey to Mt Horeb (**1 Kgs 19:8**), as well as of the 40 years of the Israelites’ sojourn in the wilderness/desert.
- Because of this, right up to the present day, the Church’s official title for Lent, **Quadragesima**, is Latin for “forty.”

Origins of Lent – *How did they do this? The Historical Development*

- The 40-day period originally began on the 6th Sunday before Easter and lasted until Holy Thursday. It was originally counted backwards from the beginning of the Easter Triduum (Latin, “three days”), that began on Holy/Maundy Thursday evening (Maundy means “mandate” from Lt *mandatum*). It included Sundays and this determined the date of the First Sunday of Lent.
- Because there was no fasting on Sundays, (Sundays were considered weekly memorials of Jesus’ resurrection, and therefore, as “little Easters”), attempts were made in the 5th century to increase the number of actual fast-days to 40.
- Good Friday and Holy Saturday which were initially separated from the Easter Triduum, were added to the preparatory fast, thus raising the fast-days to 36; then the 4 weekdays before the First Sunday of Lent were added = 40. (ie., Ash Wed, Thursday, Friday and Saturday after Ash Wed.) [**NB: originally, the beginning of Lent was the First Sunday of Lent.**]

- By the 7th century, the 6-week season of Lent was anticipated on AW and included Good Friday and Holy Saturday to keep the days of fasting at forty.
- In the Byzantine Church, Lent was begun on the 8th Sunday before Easter because in that Church there was no fasting on either Saturdays or Sundays. They therefore needed a week more (or 8 weeks), for a 40-day period of fasting.
- The Lenten fast meant that individuals took only a single daily meal, which according to ancient custom, was eaten only in the evening.
- Abstinence from meat and wine was added later on, as was abstinence from dairy products (milk, butter, cheese, and eggs).
- **Christians saw fasting as a source of fervor in prayer. Fasting was a way of preparing for the reception of the Spirit**, which was a powerful weapon in the fight against evil spirits. It was an appropriate preparation for religious actions as the reception of baptism and the Eucharist. Finally, it was a way of helping the poor with money that would otherwise have been spent on food.

The new organization of the Easter penitential period (Lent)

- When Lent was re-organized, many people thought the description “season of fasting” as being unsatisfactory because at that point in time, there were only two obligatory days of fasting – Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.
- Furthermore, the name had a negative connotation compared to other seasons of the liturgical year. But in fact, **this period of preparation for Easter had a richer meaning**, as it calls for:
 - ❑ **a greater openness to the word of God,**
 - ❑ **a great zeal in attending the liturgy,**
 - ❑ **performing works of charity, and**
 - ❑ **a conversion (Mk 1:15).**

Post Vatican II directives regarding Lent

- Two elements which are characteristic of Lent:
 - ❑ the recalling of **baptism** or the preparation of it, and
 - ❑ **penance.**
- It is by means of these two elements that the church prepares the faithful for the celebration of Easter, hearing the Word of God more frequently and devoting more time to prayer. The role of the church in penitential practices is for the need to pray for sinners.
- **During Lent, penance should be not only internal and individual but also external and social.** Penitential services should be adapted to present day practices.

- However, the rite of ashes on Ash Wednesday has made the day more popular among the faithful, than the other days of greater solemnity. Thus, the Church felt it was appropriate to leave the 'forty days' to be symbolic.
- The authorities agreed for an Easter penitential (Lent) that "lasts from Ash Wednesday to the Mass of the Lord's Supper exclusive," or forty four days if Sundays be included, thirty eight-eight if they are not. **[NB: Holy Thursday Mass – strictly only two masses are allowed – 1st Mass to conclude Lent, and 2nd Mass for the institution of the Eucharist.]**

So, what are the liturgical characteristics of Lent?

- In the Eucharistic liturgy, apart from the themes of penance, baptism and the passion of Christ, the 'novelty' of Lent consists the use of **purple/violet vestments** and the **omission of the joyous Gloria and alleluia.**

Gloria ⇒an heirloom from the treasure of ancient Church hymns, was not originally part of the liturgy of the Mass. In Rome, it was used only in the papal Mass on especially festive occasions; later, it was also sung in pontifical Masses. Only towards the end of the 11th cent., could the simple priest use it in Masses of a festive character. It was never permitted in the Masses of Lent.

- **Alleluia** ⇒its melodic richness (ie., Praise the Lord), was regarded in the early Church as a special ornament of the Roman liturgy. Though sung at funeral services in late 4th cent Rome, it was banned from Lenten Masses from the 5th/6th centuries onwards.

In Lent, the Alleluia is replaced as a second intermediate song by a text that used to be called the *tract*. It consisted of a series of psalm verses, with melodies that usually came down from an earlier period and which were relatively simple because uninfluenced by the later artistic approach to song. Because of this, they were regarded as especially appropriate to Lent.

This second intermediate song should prepare for the gospel and is meant as a kind of homage (acclamation) which we pay to the Lord who speaks to us in the gospel. Thus, the song uses verses chiefly from the NT.

Ash Wednesday (AW)

- AW officially begins Lent and the Easter cycle and usually falls on any date between February 4 to March 10, depending on the date of Easter.
- Ashes from burned palms saved from the previous year are placed on the forehead of parishioners.
- This practice of placing ashes on heads of people and originally, the wearing of sackcloth is an ancient penitential practice common among the Hebrew people (**Jonah 3:5-9; Jeremiah 6:26, 25:34; Matthew 11:21**).
- It (the placing of Ashes), was not directly connected with the beginning of Lent. But as early as the 300s, it was adopted by local churches as part of their

practice of temporarily ex-communicating, or expelling public sinners from the community.

- These people were guilty of public sins and scandals such as apostasy, heresy, murder and adultery. By the 7th century, this custom had expanded in some churches into a public AW ritual. Sinners first confessed their sins privately. Then they were presented to the bishop and publicly enrolled in the ranks of penitents in preparation for absolution on Holy Thursday.
- After the laying on of hands and the imposition of ashes, they were expelled from the congregation in imitation of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise. This served as a reminder that death is the punishment for sin. *“Reminder, you are dust and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19).*
- The penitents then lived apart from their families and from the rest of the parish for the forty days of Lent (⇒ origin of the word *‘quarantine’*). They were dressed in sackcloth and ashes, and were identified as penitents in the congregation and sometimes on the steps of the church.
- Common penances required that these penitents abstain from meat, alcohol, bathing, haircuts, shaves, marriage relations and business transactions.
- During the Middle Ages, emphasis was placed on personal rather than public sins. As a result, all adult members of the parish adopted traditions of AW in a mitigated form. Traditions similar to those in today’s parishes were observed throughout the church by the 11th century. Recently, a new formula for the imposition of ashes emphasizing a more positive aspect of Lent was introduced: *“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel” (Mark 1:15).*
- Still, in the 6th to 8th centuries, another form of penitential practice evolved under the influence of monks in the Celtic church in Britain and Ireland. This was the individual form of penance for less serious sins. This new practice would influence the evolution of the sacrament of reconciliation more than the AW ritual.
- At Mass on AW, the opening prayer (there is no penitential rite), asks that “as we begin the discipline of Lent, (you would) make this season holy by our self-denial.” This is a free rendition of a Latin prayer which, in the old Missal, concluded the blessing of the ashes and which asks that we may be strengthened for “Christian warfare.”
- This strong image, very popular in the early Church and the Middle Ages, is already found in **Job 7:1**. It is meant to bring home to us the fact that Christians are not called to an easy life but to battle against all the enemies of God, especially against their own selfishness.

What are the traditional characteristics of Lent?

- i) a somber atmosphere;
- ii) penitential practices especially fasting and abstinence; and
- iii) devotions centred around the suffering Jesus.

In the past 20 years, these traditions have been incorporating newer one to give a more positive dimension to Lent.

Penitential Theme

- In the 4th century, preparation for baptism was joined by fasting and other penitential practices before Easter in preparation for absolution from public sins and crimes. This practice spread among other parishioners and not just public sinners.
- In the Middle Ages, it became universally popular with emphasis on personal sin.
- This penitential and more somber theme of Lent gave rise to the liturgical penitential colour purple and to the exclusion of the joyful acclamations of *Alleluia* and *Glory to God* during this season.
- This penitential atmosphere of Lent was supported by other church disciplines such as the prohibition of weddings during these six weeks. Till today, weddings are still discouraged because of the penitential atmosphere of the season.

Lenten Atmosphere

- The atmosphere takes on a somber mood as indicated by the dropping of the Alleluia and Gloria.
- The penitential colour of purple is prominent in vestments and church decorations. The sanctuary is stripped of its usual festive decorations. Musical instruments were a one time discouraged.
- Until recently, it was customary to veil prominent statues and crucifixes in church with a purple cloth as a sign of sadness and mourning.
- Certain churches ca 900 AD, a large cloth was hung between the people and the altar from the beginning of Lent. This was done to hide the heavenly glory depicted by statues of saints and crosses with the figure of the triumphant Christ.
- This custom came to symbolize the exclusion of all sinners from the altar just as public sinners were excluded.
- The veiling of crosses, statues and pictures is perhaps based on the notion of a “fast of the eyes.” But from 1969 onwards, the GI states that “crosses and images of saints are not to be covered henceforth,” unless otherwise prescribed by the Bishops’ Conference.
- Since the 1600s, this veiling was limited to Passiontide, beginning on the fifth Sunday of Lent, originally called “Passion Sunday.” On this Sunday, (today, only in Cycle B), the final words are: “At that they picked up rocks to throw at Jesus, but he hid himself and slipped out of the temple precincts” (**Jn 8:59**).

Lent and Baptism

- From the 3rd century, Lent evolved around the theme of baptism, which had been associated with the vigil of the Lord's resurrection at Easter.
- During the first few centuries, preparation for baptism could last for several years. Adults seeking church membership could not just "sign up." [RCIA today?]
- They were tested for up to three years. During this time, they were instructed, supported in their withdrawal from pagan practices and loyalties, and taught to live a new way. Only after this were they admitted to candidacy for baptism.
- Finally, during what would later evolve to become Lent, they received intense instruction, submitted to exorcisms, participated in special rituals, fasted on Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, and were then baptized during the Easter Vigil.
- When the Roman persecution of Christians ended in 313 AD, the church began a public and more concise process *catechumenate* (Greek: *katechein*, meaning "to proclaim," or "to teach"), of accepting new adult believers, catechumens, into membership. The catechumens' final phase of preparation for baptism always included a period of fasting to support changes in lifestyle.
- This ritual preparation for Easter was a special time at first only for catechumens. Gradually it became popular for those already baptized to participate in this tradition of fasting.
- **When the catechumenate was discontinued in the early Middle Ages due to the widespread custom of infant baptism, Christians continued the tradition of fasting for forty days in preparation for Easter.**

Sundays in Lent

- Sunday liturgies during Lent have always preserved a reference to the ancient process of the adult catechumenate emphasizing the journey towards baptism.
- In 1972, the church revived the adult catechumenate with its publication of the RCIA.
- Once again, the ceremonies focus on the journey of the catechumens and parishioners towards baptism. The rite of election, the presentation of the gospel, the creed, the Our Father, the public scrutinies that replaced exorcisms on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays, and the dismissal of catechumens after the homily to another part of the building for special instruction on the day's Scripture reading, a.k.a. "breaking of the word."
- The church's liturgies are not concerned with the suffering and death of Jesus, unlike the other more popular lenten devotions, until Holy Week.

- Instead, the 'new' liturgy strives to make greater use of the baptismal motifs. This is true especially for texts that call for and lead to conversion and penance. These Sundays give the revised liturgy of Lent its special character.

First Sunday

- uses the pericope on the temptation of Jesus in the desert from Mt, Mk or Lk, depending on the year of the cycle.
- The preface emphasizes the forty-day fast of Jesus whereby he makes "this a holy season of self-denial." It extols his victory over the "devil's temptations."
- The opening prayer helps us to understand the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection and teach us to reflect in our lives.
- The First Sunday contains the message of Christ's struggle (desert, fasting, hunger, temptation) but also of his victory over the powers hostile to God, as well as an anticipation of his glorification ("angels came and looked after him"). It is an overture to the Paschal mystery of Easter.

Second Sunday

- Passage is on the transfiguration of Christ. The transfiguration on the mountain is proof that the cross and death are not an end but a passage to glory.

Third Sunday (Yr B)

- In the account of the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus makes a clear reference to his death and resurrection.

Fourth Sunday (Yr B)

- The conversation with Nicodemus speaks at length not only of the paschal mystery but of the symbolism of light.

Fifth Sunday (Yr B)

- Jesus is here the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies in order to produce much fruit.
- "Now is my soul troubled..." But when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself." The evangelist adds: "By these words he indicated the kind of death he would die."

'Passiontide/Passion Sunday'... PALM SUNDAY (ref. to *Understanding Holy Week*)

- formerly this was known as the *First Sunday of the Passion*. Now, it is known as the **Fifth Sunday of Lent**.
- "**Passiontide**" was meant to indicate that from this Sunday on, the texts of the Mass would lay greater emphasis on the Suffering of Christ.
- This was the Sunday on which the custom of veiling of crosses, statues and pictures in the church was associated with.
- This custom probably goes back to the "hunger cloth" of Lenten veil in the 11th century where the altar cross was hidden away from the congregation. A

possible reason was that since all were sinners, as part of the penitential rite, they were to be 'deprived' of the sight of the altar ⇒ **fast of the eyes**.

- But it must be noted that the entire season of Lent speaks of the Lord's passage **through** suffering and death to resurrection.

Fasting and Abstinence

- Fasting and abstinence are often linked together but are two different disciplines.
- **Fasting** deals with the quantity of food eaten on particular days (little or none), whereas **abstinence** refers to the kind of food denied oneself, eg., meat.
- Fasting has always been a popular religious practice. Denying oneself a basic human need such as food for a period of time may be done for different reasons. It may be in preparation for a feast; or for promoting discipline; or in support for one's prayers.
- Fasting cleanses oneself of previous abuses and sin. All of these have been motives for the lenten tradition of fasting.
- Another motive has always been part of lenten fasting and abstinence: almsgiving, giving to the needy from what is saved through the discipline of fasting and abstinence, or from one's surplus.
- Fasting and abstinence began as voluntary practices. Gradually they became very strict and were enforced by church law. From the 400s to the 800s, only one meal a day – usually in the evening according to local custom – was permitted. Flesh meat, fish, alcohol, and in some cases, even eggs and milk were forbidden.
- Beginning in the 10th century, it became customary to eat this meal at noon. By the 14th, a light meal was permitted in the evening. In the Middle Ages the prohibition against fish and dairy products during Lent was lifted.
- A very severe lenten discipline of fasting and abstinence remained in force until 1966. Only one main meal was permitted on all days of Lent except Sunday for parishioners between the ages of 21 and 59.
- Two other meatless meals, just sufficient to sustain strength, were permitted, but these together, must, and could not equal another full meal. This was coupled with abstinence from flesh meat, gravies, and condiments on AW and all Fridays for those seven years of age or older.
- On weekdays of Lent, meat was permitted only at the main meal except on days of abstinence.

Popular Penances

- Some forms of penances which are not obligated by the church have been popular throughout centuries.

- Most occur in the privacy of the homes and families yet are still popular today. Eg., giving up TV, deserts, candies, soft drinks, alcohol, 'junk food' eaten in between meals, and the most common, saving money which is to be given later to the needy.
- These forms of fasting and abstinence are but all to instill discipline and self-control.

Stations of the Cross

- This is the most known and traditional lenten devotion in parishes drawing attention to the suffering and death of Jesus.
- During the time of the crusades (1095-1270), it became popular for pilgrims to the Holy Land to walk in the footsteps of Jesus to Calvary.
- In the next two centuries, after the Muslims recaptured the Holy Land, pilgrimages were too dangerous to be conducted openly in public.
- A substitute pilgrimage, the Stations of the Cross, became a popular outdoor devotion throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. They represented critical events from SS or tradition of Jesus' journey to Calvary and varied in number from 5 – 20 until the 18th century when Pope Clement XII fixed the number of stations to 14.
- Only in the mid-14th century were Stations allowed inside the churches. The Stations became a familiar feature in Catholic churches. In the 1960's, it became popular to add a 15th station representing the final journey, ie., ***the resurrection***.

Hot Cross Buns and Pretzels

- The popular snack, pretzels, had its origin in early Christian lenten practice. Because fat, milk, and eggs were forbidden during Lent, this special bread was made with dough consisting of only flour, salt, and water.
- Pretzels were little breads which were shaped in the form of arms crossed in prayer and were called *bracellae* (Lt. for 'little arms').
- Among the Germans the latin word became "bretzel." These pretzels were a common lenten food throughout the Middle Ages in Europe and became an all year round snack, in its original shape, only in the 19th century.
- Hot Cross Buns, another popular food eaten during Lent, originated in England where the custom of baking buns and placing icing on them to form a cross began. These buns were eaten on Good Friday.
- Eventually, they were baked and eaten throughout Lent and even during the Easter season. Today, raisins etc are added into the buns.

Recent Trends

- A trend began in the 1960s to emphasize the more positive aspects of discipline and good works.

In 1966, through his apostolic constitution, *Poenitemini*, Pope Paul VI sanctioned limited obligatory abstinence to AW and all Fridays of Lent. The discipline of fasting was restricted to AW and Good Friday.

- While the emphasis today is on voluntary lenten practices, direction still comes from the historical evolution of Lent with emphasis on baptism, personal conversion, penance, and the suffering and death of Jesus.

Visiting Churches

- This is unique only to the local Singapore church. Introduced by the French Fathers, it was to inculcate a practice of emulating the journey made by Jesus moving from point to point on the night before he died.
- The visiting of churches was to be made on foot and it was to be possible in the 50's, 60's and 70's when there was a group of relatively close town churches – OL Lourdes, Sts Peter and Paul, St Joseph and the Cathedral.
- However, this practice became somewhat like a picnic and excursion. It became unsettling and a disturbance to prayer for others.
- The core would be if one could spend quality time with the Lord for an hour at least in deep prayer, thereafter, visiting other churches, if one feels comfortable.

Bibliography

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