

History of Lent

FR. WILLIAM
SAUNDERS

What are the origins of Lent? Did the Church always have this time before Easter?

Lent is a special time of prayer, penance, sacrifice and good works in preparation of the celebration of Easter. In the desire to renew the liturgical practices of the Church, *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). The word *Lent* itself is derived from the Anglo-Saxon words *lencten*, meaning "Spring," and *lenctentid*, which literally means not only "Springtide" but also was the word for "March," the month in which the majority of Lent falls.

Since the earliest times of the Church, there is evidence of some kind of Lenten preparation for Easter. For instance, St. Irenaeus (d. 203) wrote to Pope St. Victor I, commenting on the celebration of Easter and the differences between practices in the East and the West: "The dispute is not only about the day, but also about the actual character of the fast. Some think that they ought to fast for one day, some for two, others for still more; some make their 'day' last 40 hours on end. Such variation in the observance did not originate in our own day, but very much earlier, in the time of our forefathers" (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, V, 24). When Rufinus translated this passage from Greek into Latin, the punctuation made between "40" and "hours" made the meaning to appear to be "40 days, twenty-four hours a day." The importance of the passage, nevertheless, remains that since the time of "our forefathers" – always an expression for the apostles - a 40-day period of Lenten preparation existed. However, the actual practices and duration of Lent were still not homogenous throughout the Church.

Lent becomes more regularized after the legalization of Christianity in A.D. 313. The Council of Nicea (325), in its disciplinary canons, noted that two provincial synods should be held each year, "one before the 40 days of Lent." St. Athanasius (d. 373) in his "Festal Letters" implored his congregation to make a 40-day fast prior to the more intense fasting of Holy Week. St. Cyril of

Jerusalem (d. 386) in his *Catechetical Lectures*, which are the paradigm for our current RCIA programs, had 18 pre-baptismal instructions given to the catechumens during Lent. St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) in his series of "Festal Letters" also noted the practices and duration of Lent, emphasizing the 40-day period of fasting. Finally, Pope St. Leo (d. 461) preached that the faithful must "fulfill with their fasts the Apostolic institution of the 40 days," again noting the apostolic origins of Lent. One can safely conclude that by the end of the fourth century, the 40-day period of Easter preparation known as Lent existed, and that prayer and fasting constituted its primary spiritual exercises.

Of course, the number "40" has always had special spiritual significance regarding preparation. On Mount Sinai, preparing to receive the Ten Commandments, "Moses stayed there with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights, without eating any food or drinking any water" (Ex 34:28). Elijah walked "40 days and 40 nights" to the mountain of the Lord, Mount Horeb (another name for Sinai) (1 Kgs 19:8). Most importantly, Jesus fasted and prayed for "40 days and 40 nights" in the desert before He began His public ministry (Mt 4:2).

Once the 40 days of Lent were established, the next development concerned how much fasting was to be done. In Jerusalem, for instance, people fasted for 40 days, Monday through Friday, but not on Saturday or Sunday, thereby making Lent last for eight weeks. In Rome and in the West, people fasted for six weeks, Monday through Saturday, thereby making Lent last for six weeks. Eventually, the practice prevailed of fasting for six days a week over the course of six weeks, and Ash Wednesday was instituted to bring the number of fast days before Easter to 40. 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 food like fish. For example, Pope St. Gregory (d. 604), writing to St. Augustine of Canterbury, issued the following rule: "We abstain from flesh, meat, and from all things that come from flesh, as milk, cheese and eggs."

Second, the general rule was for a person to have one meal a day, in the evening or at 3 p.m.

These Lenten fasting rules also evolved. Eventually, a smaller repast was allowed during the day to keep up one's strength from manual

labor. Eating fish was allowed, and later eating meat was also allowed through the week except on Ash Wednesday and Friday. Dispensations were given for eating dairy products if

a pious work was performed, and eventually this rule was relaxed totally. (However, the abstinence from even dairy products led to the practice of blessing Easter eggs and eating pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday.)

Nevertheless, I was always taught, "If you gave something up for the Lord, tough it out. Don't act like a Pharisee looking for a loophole."

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Over the years, modifications have been made to the Lenten observances, making our practices not only simple but also easy. Ash Wednesday still marks the beginning of Lent, which lasts for 40 days, not including Sundays. 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. (An interesting note is that technically on Sundays and solemnities like St. Joseph's Day (March 19) and the Annunciation (March 25), one is exempt and can partake of whatever has been offered up for Lent.

Nevertheless, I was always taught, "If you gave something up for the Lord, tough it out. Don't act like a Pharisee looking for a loophole." Moreover, an emphasis must be placed on performing spiritual works, like attending the Stations of the Cross, attending Mass, making a weekly holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament, taking time for personal prayer and spiritual reading and most especially making a good confession and receiving sacramental absolution. Although the practices may have evolved over the centuries, the focus remains the same: to repent of sin, to renew our faith and to prepare to celebrate joyfully the mysteries of our salvation,

Acknowledgement Saunders, Rev. William. "History of Lent." *Arlington Catholic Herald*.

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the main penitential season on the

liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church. Here

we will talk about what lent is, it's history, regulations

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and more. Despite being a season of penance and fasting it is quite popular even among non-catholics.

What is Lent?

The season of Lent is a Catholic liturgical season consisting of forty days of fasting, prayer, and penitence beginning at Ash Wednesday and concluding at sundown on Holy Thursday. The official liturgical color for the season of Lent is violet.

The History of Lent

The observance of Lent is related to the celebration of Easter. In the first three centuries of the Christian era, most Christians prepared for Easter by fasting and praying for three days. In some places this was extended to the entire week before Easter (now known as “Holy Week”). There is evidence that in Rome, the length of preparation was three weeks.

The word *Lent* derives from the Middle English word *lenten*, meaning springtime - the time of lengthening days. There is biblical support for doing penance, in both the Old and New Testaments. The season of Lent builds on this biblical support, but like all Catholic liturgical seasons, it developed over

in its early three-week form, Lent was the period of intense spiritual and liturgical preparation for the sacraments before they were

baptized at Easter. Many members of the community imitated this time
preparation with the
catechumens.

fourth century (when Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire) Lent had developed into its present length of forty days. Forty days is significant for Christians because it is the length of the fast of the temptation of Jesus in the desert (cf. Luke 4:1-13). Recently, research has suggested that

development of Lent was also influenced by the forty-day span of fasting practiced by many in the church (especially monks). This fast, beginning right after Epiphany (January 6th) stressed prayer
discipline

Christianity became widespread and most people were baptized as infants, Lent lost the connection to the preparation of catechumens. Instead, the themes of repentance and fasting became dominant. Vatican II restored the order of catechumens. Since then, most adult converts to Catholicism are baptized at the Easter Vigil, which takes place after sundown on Holy Saturday. As a result, the ancient baptismal meaning of Lent is once again becoming important.

When does Lent
begin?

Traditionally, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends at sundown on Holy

Thursday. Since this is more than forty days, some contend that Sundays are not counted in Lent. Instead, they argue, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday are counted instead. Others say that Lent begins on the first Sunday after Ash Wednesday. No one is exactly sure how Ash Wednesday became the first day of Lent.

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday dates from at least the fourth century, although it is not possible to give an exact date. During that century, penitents looking for forgiveness and re-entry into the community would dress in sackcloth and sprinkle ashes to show their repentance. This custom certainly predates Christianity as can be seen by references in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Esther 4:2-3; Daniel 19:3; Jonah 3:6).

⁰⁸ There is no doubt that the custom of distributing ashes to everyone on Ash Wednesday came from imitation of the practice of wearing ashes by public penitents. Public penitents were those doing

e for sins such as murder, apostasy, and adultery. When

they completed their public penance, Shares are able to be readmitted to communion with the Church. As Lent increasingly focused on the

of repentance and renewal, Christians sensed their own need for repentance. The practice of the imposition of ashes to all members of the community is mentioned in official documents of 1091 (Cf. of Benventum, 1091 Manse, XX, 739) although nearly a hundred years earlier it is already mentioned in a homily of the period.

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Regulations

The Catholic Church, in an attempt to help Catholics do at least a minimum during Lent, asks all Catholics to fast and abstain from meat on certain days. Fasting means to limit food to one full meal a

with the possibility of two smaller meals (not adding up to a full meal) as needed. Abstinence means not eating meat, although fish is allowed. Catholics are required to observe all days of fasting and abstinence which is one of the precepts of the Church.

Those 14 years of age or older are to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and all the Fridays of Lent. Catholics between the ages of 16 and 59 are also to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. They may eat one full meal on these days, and two small meals to maintain strength. The two small meals together must not equal the size of one full meal. If one's work or health make it inadvisable to fast or abstain from meat, they are not obligated to do so. This includes mental health: Fasting may be harmful for someone who struggles with an

eating disorder. Such a person might do an alternate penance on the days of fasting. Pregnant and nursing women are exempt from the fast.

At one time, people gave up all animal products and during the whole Lenten season. The Eastern Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches still follow this rule. Since chickens continue to produce eggs and cows milk, the custom developed to make the milk into cheese and color the eggs so that when Easter arrived, no food would be wasted.

Lenten Penance

Many Catholics were taught as children to “give up something” for Lent. The sacrifices in Lent are really penance, in the same spirit as the Ninevites that repented at the preaching of Jonah. Throughout our history, Christians have found prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to be an important part of repentance and

1. Many Catholics now add something during Lent rather than giving up something, either to Shares s personal habits that need work or to add some outreach to others in need.

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urch does not specifically require that we do something beyond the requirements of fasting and nce. To do nothing, however, would certainly not be in keeping with the spirit of Lent. rmore, the sacrifices and extra things we do for Lent help us grow closer to Christ. We are gout on so many graces if we do not participate fully in Lent. It is

not necessary to be perfect, but uld put forth a good effort.

practice is to do something extra in prayer, something involving fasting (whether limiting our of food or giving up something non food-related), and something involving almsgiving (giving

or goods to the needy or doing extra acts of charity).

Other Definitions Concerning Lent

Carnival Originally a celebration just before Lent. Carnival is Latin for “farewell to meat.”

Laetare Sunday The fourth Sunday of Lent, which marks the halfway point, celebrated with rose vestments instead of the usual violet. Laetare means "to rejoice" in Latin, and the lighter vestments signify a brief celebration in expectation of Easter, even in the midst of Lent.

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What is Lent? |
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What is Lent?

Wednesday, March 2, 2022 -
Thursday, April 14, 2022

Lent is a 40 day season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving that begins on Ash Wednesday and ends at sundown on Holy Thursday. It's a period of preparation to celebrate the Lord's Resurrection at Easter. During Lent, we

seek the Lord in prayer by reading Sacred Scripture; we serve by giving alms; and we practice self-control through fasting. We are called not only to abstain from luxuries during Lent, but to a true inner conversion of heart as we seek to follow Christ's will more faithfully. We recall the waters of baptism in which we were also baptized into Christ's death, died to sin and evil, and began new life in Christ. Many know of the tradition of abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent, but we are also called to practice self-discipline and fast in other ways throughout the season. Contemplate the meaning and origins of the Lenten fasting tradition in this reflection. In addition, the giving of alms is one way to share God's gifts-not only through the distribution of money, but through the sharing of our time and talents. As St. John Chrysostom reminds us: "Not to

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What is Lent? | USCCB enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2446). In Lent, the baptized are called to renew their baptismal commitment as others prepare to be baptized through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, a period of learning and discernment for individuals who have declared their desire to become Catholics.

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Here are three tips to deepen your relationship with God during the 40

days of Lent.

I to Live Lent This Year

Here are three tips to deepen your relationship with God during the 40 days of #Lent 1) Participate in the sacraments. 2) Help those in need around you. 3) Sacrifice something

hard for
you.

Prayer, Fasting, & Almsgiving

Prayer

"For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy." -St. Therese of Lisieux (CCC 2558) During Lent, we are asked to devote ourselves to seeking the Lord in prayer and reading Scripture, to service by giving alms, and to practice self-control through fasting. Dive into God's

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the rosary with your family.

PRAYERS AND
DEVOTIONS

Fasting

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are obligatory days of fasting and abstinence for Catholics. In addition, Fridays during Lent are obligatory days of abstinence. For members of the Latin Catholic Church, the norms on fasting are obligatory from age 18 until age 59. When fasting, a person is permitted to eat one full meal, as well as two smaller meals that together are not equal to a full meal. The norms concerning abstinence from meat are binding upon members of the Latin Catholic Church from age 14 onwards. Members of the Eastern Catholic Churches are to observe the particular law of their own *sui iuris* Church. If possible, the fast on Good Friday is continued until the Easter Vigil (on Holy Saturday night) as the "paschal fast" to honor the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus and to prepare ourselves to share more fully and to celebrate more readily his Resurrection.

Resources on
Fasting

For members of the Latin Catholic Church within the United States, please see the USCCB's Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence and

the complementary norm to canon 1253 and the Code of Canon Law (cc. 1249-1253) CRS Rice Bowl is also one way Catholics can enhance their Lenten fasting practice by giving up meals and donating the cost of those meals to Catholic Relief Services in order to help those who do not have enough to eat. Almsgiving

The foundational call of Christians to charity is a frequent theme of the Gospels. During Lent, we are asked to focus more intently on "almsgiving," which means donating money or goods to the poor and performing other acts of charity. As one of the three pillars of Lenten practice, almsgiving is "a witness to fraternal charity" and "a work of justice pleasing to God." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2462).

Opportunities for Almsgiving during Lent

There are several special opportunities for almsgiving through donations to Church ministries for which collections are conducted during the Lenten season including:

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Lent? | USCCB Collection for the Church in
Central and Eastern Europe National Black
and Indian Mission Collection Catholic Relief
Services Collection Collection for the Holy Land

CRS Rice Bowl Many dioceses hold special appeals for local needs during Lent and there are countless other ways to offer your time, talent and

treasure to needy individuals and organizations during Lent and throughout the year. For ideas, contact your diocesan Social Concerns office or your local Catholic Charities affiliate.

The USCCB Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development has a variety of [Resources and Tools](#) on the Church's social mission and the option for the poor, including an updated [Poverty Tour](#).

Lent FAQs

What are the upcoming dates for Lent?

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Why do we say that there are forty days of Lent? When you count all the days from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday, there are 46.

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So does that mean that when we give something up for Lent, such as candy, we can have it on Sundays?

I understand that all the Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence from meat, but I'm not sure what is classified as meat.

Does meat include chicken and dairy products?

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I've noticed that restaurants and grocery stores advertise specials on expensive types of fish and seafood on Fridays during Lent. Some of my Catholic friends take advantage of these deals, but somehow I don't feel right treating myself to this

I understand that Catholics ages 18 to 59 should fast on Ash Wednesday and on + Good Friday, but what exactly are the rules for these fasts?

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Lent FAQs

What are the upcoming dates for Lent? 2022: Wednesday, March 2 - Thursday, April 14 2023: Wednesday, February 22 - Thursday, April 6 2024: Wednesday, February 14 - Thursday, March 28 2025: Wednesday, March 5 - Thursday, April 17

Why do we say that there are forty days of Lent? When you count all the days from Ash Wednesday through Holy Saturday, there are 46.

It might be more accurate to say that there is the "forty day fast within Lent." Historically, Lent has varied from a week to three weeks to the present configuration of 46 days. The forty day fast, however, has been more stable. The Sundays of Lent are certainly part of the Time of Lent, but they are not prescribed days of fast and abstinence.

So does that mean that when we give something up for Lent, such as candy, we can have it on Sundays?

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from the prescribed days of fast and abstinence on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and the days of abstinence every Friday of Lent, Catholics have traditionally chosen additional penitential practices for the whole Time of Lent. These practices are disciplinary in nature and often more effective if they are continuous, i.e., kept on Sundays as well. That being said, such practices are not regulated by the Church, but by individual conscience.

I understand that all the Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence from meat, but I'm not sure what is classified as meat. Does meat include chicken and dairy products?

Abstinence laws consider that meat comes only from animals such as chickens, cows, sheep or pigs --- all of which live on land. Birds are also considered meat. Abstinence does not include meat juices and liquid foods made from meat. Thus, such foods as chicken broth, consomme, soups cooked or flavored with meat, meat gravies or sauces, as well as seasonings or condiments made from animal fat are technically not forbidden. However, moral theologians have traditionally taught that we should abstain from all animal derived products (except foods such as gelatin, butter, cheese and eggs, which do not have any meat taste). Fish are a different category of animal. Salt and freshwater species of fish, amphibians, reptiles, (cold

blooded animals) and shellfish are permitted.

I've noticed that restaurants and grocery stores advertise specials on expensive types of fish and seafood on Fridays during Lent. Some of my Catholic friends take advantage of these deals, but somehow I don't feel right treating myself to this

While fish, lobster, and other shellfish are not considered meat and can be consumed on days of abstinence, indulging in the lavish buffet at your favorite seafood place sort of misses the point. Abstaining from meat and other indulgences during Lent is a penitential practice. On the Fridays of Lent, we remember the sacrifice of Christ on Good Friday and unite ourselves with that sacrifice through abstinence and prayer.

I understand that Catholics ages 18 to 59 should fast on Ash Wednesday and on Good Friday, but what exactly are the rules for these fasts? Fasting on these days means we can have only one full, meatless meal. Some food can be taken at the other regular meal times if necessary but *combined they should be less than a full meal*. Liquids are allowed at any time, but no solid food should be consumed between meals.

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Are there exemptions other than for age from the requirement to

fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday?

Those that are excused from fast and abstinence outside the age limits include the physically or mentally ill including individuals suffering from chronic illnesses such as diabetes. Also excluded are pregnant or nursing women. In all cases, common sense should prevail, and ill persons should not further jeopardize their health by fasting.

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