

What is Lent?

Lent, from the Middle English word *lenten*, meaning springtime - the time of lengthening days, is a **period of forty days of fasting, prayer, and penitence before Easter**. There is biblical support for doing penance, but the season of Lent, like all Catholic liturgical seasons, developed over time.

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 preparation period was three weeks.

In its early three-week form, Lent was the period of intense spiritual and liturgical preparation for catechumens before they were baptized at Easter. Many members of the community imitated this period of preparation with the catechumens.

By the fourth century (when Christianity was legalized) Lent had developed into its current length of forty days, the length of the fast and temptation of Jesus in the desert (cf. Luke 4:1-13). Recently, research has suggested that the development of Lent was also influenced by the forty-day period of fasting practiced by many in the early Church (especially monks). This fast, beginning right after Epiphany (January 6th) stressed prayer and penance. Once most people were Christian and baptized as infants, Lent lost the connection to the preparation of catechumens and the

themes of repentance and fasting became dominant.

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 and Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday are. Others say that Lent begins on the First Sunday of Lent and Ash Wednesday and the rest of that week are a pre-Lent. No one is exactly sure how Ash Wednesday became the first day of Lent.

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 renewal. Many Christians now add something during Lent rather than giving up something, either to address personal habits that need work or to add some outreach to others in need. It is not necessary to "give up something" but it would be a tragedy to do nothing.

Ash Wednesday

It is impossible to determine when the seventh Wednesday before Easter was designated as the beginning of the preparation period before Easter. It does date from at least the fourth century. 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; Danie19:3; Jonah 3:6) and Christian Bible (cf. Matthew 11:21).

eggs so that when Easter arrived, no food would be wasted.

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

Lenten 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 day 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 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 14 and 59 are also to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. If one's work or health make it inadvisable fast or abstain from meat, they are not obligated to do so.

At one time, people gave up all dairy products and meat during all of Lent. Since chickens continue to produce eggs and cows milk, the custom developed to make the milk into cheese and color the