

RCIA  
Ash Wednesday & The Season of Lent  
Session 18

“Lent is a solemn, reflective season of the liturgical year that is the preparation for the mysteries of Easter. It begins on Ash Wednesday, and lasts 40 days, until Easter (the 40 days do not include the Sunday’s of Lent). On Ash Wednesday people come to Church to receive ashes on their forehead, a reminder that without God we are simply dust. The 40 days of Lent recall the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert before beginning his public ministry. During Lent Christians are called to renew themselves through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.

(#540, 1095, 1438 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)



# Ash Wednesday And The Season of Lent

## Mardi Gras

Lent is immediately preceded by a celebration that has no mention on the calendar of the church year. The tradition of Mardi Gras (French, "*Fat Tuesday*") began as a pre-Lenten day of feasting and carnival (Latin *carnelevarium*, "*removal of meat*"). It was a "*last fling*" in preparation for the severe fasting and abstinence, which began the next day on Ash Wednesday. This popular tradition had a practical purpose. Foods forbidden by the church's severe Lenten discipline were the ones needing refrigeration. Since controlled refrigeration was unheard of until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it made sense to eat what would otherwise spoil during the six weeks of Lent and to help other families to do the same with a party atmosphere.

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, familiar features associated with carnivals were already popular. They reflected pre-Christian revelry and masquerading associated with ancient pagan observance of Spring, or vernal equinox. Because church discipline forbade this kind of revelry during Lent, it was natural that it be substituted by a pre-Lenten party-time.

The day before Ash Wednesday is also called *Shrove Tuesday*. This name (Middle English *Shriven*, "*confession*") comes from an old custom of going to confession in preparation for the holy season of Lent.

## Ashes

In the Church, ashes have been used according to the ancient symbolism of the Scriptures where ashes were used to signify "*worthlessness*" (Job 30:19; Sir. 40: 3), "*sorrow*" (Job 2:8; Jonah 3:6), grief and penance (Mt 11:21), or a sign of affliction (Ps. 102:10). Today, however, ashes form a continuum from the mystery of Easter to the following Ash Wednesday when the palm branches blessed on Palm Sunday that year are burned, blessed, and signed on the foreheads of the faithful on the next Ash Wednesday. (Where palm branches are not available, other suitable material, such as dried branches or leaves, may be substituted.) Ashes are also used in the Catholic liturgy in the ceremonies for the dedication of a church and the consecration of altars. In the days of early Christians the practice of public penance was often performed in biblical imitation with the putting on of "*sackcloth and ashes*".

## Ash Wednesday

In the present Church calendar Ash Wednesday is the first day of the observance of the 40 days of Lent. It takes its name from the solemn ceremony of the liturgy of the day wherein the ashes of palms or other suitable substances are blessed and then marked on the foreheads of the faithful in the form of a cross with the accompanying words, "*Remember you are dust and unto dust you shall return.*" Or "*Turn away from sin and embrace the Gospel.*" It is a solemn call to penance so that one may enjoy eternal life.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, public penitents dressed in sackcloth and were sprinkled with ashes to show their repentance. The practice of public penance gradually died out. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it had become customary for the faithful to receive ashes at the beginning of Lent.

## Lent

The whole church goes on retreat for six weeks about a month and a half after the Christmas season. This annual spiritual renewal prepares for the celebration of Christianity's most fundamental belief: *Jesus was raised from the dead and is Christ, the Lord*. Lent, therefore, has no meaning in itself. It prepares for Easter and new life. This has given rise to a great variety of religious traditions from the earliest centuries of Christianity. Three themes hold the six weeks together: (1) the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, (2) the implications of this mystery for those preparing for baptism, and (3) a spiritual renewal of faith and conversion on the part of those already baptized. These themes have not always received equal emphasis over the centuries. Preparation for baptism, the original heart of Lent, had almost disappeared until Vatican II reforms.

Lent is closely associated with the transition from winter to spring. The word "Lent", for example comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for springtime, "*lente*." It describes the gradual "lengthening" of daylight after the Winter solstice.

Already during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Christians prepared for the annual *Pascha*, or Easter, by fasting for two days. This was a natural thing to do in preparation for the holiest of times when, during the first generations, the Lord's final return was expected. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, this fast was extended to all of Holy Week. A distinct and lengthy season of preparation did not exist until the early 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Lent evolved around the theme of baptism, which from at least the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, has been associated with the vigil of the anniversary of the Lord's resurrection: the Easter Vigil. During the first centuries preparation for baptism could last for several years. Adults seeking church membership could not just "*sign up*." 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 then were they admitted to candidacy for baptism. Finally, during what would become Lent, they received intense instruction, submitted to exorcisms, participated in special rituals, fasted on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and were baptized during the Easter Vigil.

When the Roman persecution of Christians ended in 313, the church began a public and more concise process, *catechumenate* (Greek "*katechin*", to "*proclaim, 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 wide spread custom of Infant baptism, Christians continued the tradition of fasting for forty days in preparation for Easter.

Early in Christianity the discipline of fasting became associated with the number 40. This gradually determined the length of Lent. Fasting by catechumens, and then by other Christians, was done in the imitation of Jesus' forty day fast in the desert (Matt 4:2), Moses' forty days on Mt Sinai (Exodus 34:28), Elijah's forty day fast on his journey to Mount Horeb (1Kings 19:8), and the forty years the Israelites spent in the desert. To this day the church's official title for Lent, *Quadragesima*, is Latin for forty.

These forty days of fasting were originally counted from the beginning of the Easter Triduum (Latin, "*three days*") that began on Holy Thursday evening. This determined the date of the First Sunday of Lent. Fasting, however, was never done on Sundays, which were always considered weekly memorials of Jesus' resurrection, and therefore as "*Little Easters*". By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the six week season of Lent was anticipated on Ash Wednesday and included Good Friday and Holy Saturday to keep the days of fasting forty. The modern church excluded both Saturdays and Sundays from fasting and its Lent begins a week earlier.

Sunday liturgies during Lent have always preserved a reference to the ancient process of the adult catechumenate with an emphasis on the journey to baptism. In 1972 the church revived the adult catechumenate with its publication of ***The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)***. Now once again ceremonies highlight for both catechumens and parishioners the journey to 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, popularly called "*breaking open the Word*".

The church's liturgies are not preoccupied with the suffering and death of Jesus, as are most popular Lenten devotions, until Holy Week.

Three kinds of traditions have given Lent its particular character: (1) those that support a somber atmosphere; (2) penitential practices, especially fasting and abstinence; and (3) devotions centered on Jesus' suffering. During the last 30 plus years these devotions have been joined by newer ones, adding a more positive dimension to Lent.

The atmosphere of Lent takes on a somber mood. In parish liturgies the joyous *Alleluia* and *Glory to God* are dropped. The penitential color of purple is prominent in vestments and church decorations. The sanctuary is stripped of its usual festive decorations. Musical instruments, at one time in our history, were discouraged.

## Fasting and Abstinence

Fasting and Abstinence are often linked together but are two different disciplines. Fasting has to do with the quantity of food eaten on a particular day (little or none). Abstinence refers to the kind of food denied oneself, for example, 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 prepares for a feast. It promotes self-discipline. It supports ones prayers. It 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 places even eggs and milk products were forbidden. Beginning in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it became customary to eat this meal at noon. By the 14<sup>th</sup>, a light meal was permitted in the evening. In the Middle Ages the prohibition against fish and dairy products during Lent was lifted.

A rather 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 were permitted, sufficient to maintain strength, but together not equaling one full meal. This was coupled with abstinence from flesh meat, gravies, and condiments on Ash Wednesday and all Fridays for those seven years of age and older. On weekdays of Lent, meat was permitted only at the main meal except on days of abstinence. Today we fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. We abstain from eating meat on all the Fridays of Lent.

Other forms of penance not obligated by church laws have always been popular throughout the centuries. Most of these occurred in the privacy of families and are still popular today: giving up desserts, candies, gum, soft drinks, alcohol, and "junk food" eaten between meals. Besides saving monies to be given to the needy, these popular forms of fasting and abstinence promote personal discipline and self-control. So, too, do other forms of contemporary Lenten practices, such as limiting family television viewing.