

SEASON of LENT

LENT – an Anglo-Saxon word for SPRING. Many things may come to mind when we hear the word LENT, such as: giving up something, Stations of the Cross, fasting, ashes, palms, 40 days, penance, purple vestments.

Lent's key concept is Baptism – it is first and foremost a time for the whole community to join with the Elect in preparing for their baptism at the Easter Vigil. Lent also reminds us of our commitments at baptism and calls us to continuing conversion (turning to God) and reconciliation, so that we can renew our baptismal promises at Easter.

LENT prepares:

- The Catechumen for Baptism
- The Penitent for Reconciliation
- The Community for Salvation (renewing baptismal promises)

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT of the Lenten Season:

- 2nd Cent. – “paschal fast” – two days before the 50-day celebration of Pentecost (Easter), i.e., Good Friday and Holy Saturday
- 3rd Cent. – 6-day Lent (Mon.-Sat. of Holy Week); fasting connected to Christ's Passion & Death; end of the fast, to Baptism & Christ's Resurrection
- 4th Cent. – 40-day preparation for Easter; fasting on Fridays, soon extended to Monday through Friday (and Holy Saturday)
- Lent became the final stage for catechumens' preparation for baptism at the Easter Vigil (a 3-year process by 3rd Cent.); church community accompanied catechumens on their journey to Easter
- 4th/5th Cents. – many delayed baptism since only one confession allowed (a “2nd baptism”); sin after that and you had to be a penitent, a martyr, or get viaticum as a last chance for salvation
- Catechumenate shifted from moral instruction to doctrinal instruction
- Scrutinies – on the 3 Great Gospel Sundays; not testing the candidates, but testing and repressing the power of Satan
- 5th Cent. – no marriages during Lent
- Middle Ages – infant baptism predominated; 3 Great Gospels were moved to weekdays; scrutinies first were expanded to 7, then were compressed into one ceremony (8th-9th Cent.); adult catechumenate died out; some rites continued for children; Lent focused on the Passion and Death of Christ; penitential practices were done to avoid punishment for sins
- 1955 – renewal of Holy Week, emphasized baptizing at the Easter Vigil and urged the renewal of the adult catechumenate
- Vatican II – ordered restoration of the adult catechumenate; revision of baptismal rites; said Lent's baptismal character was to have greater prominence in liturgies

The Catechumenate is for the whole community, not just those to be baptized; hence, rites are at Sunday liturgy. The community has a responsibility to share faith, pray for the catechumens, and model Christian life for them.

1st Sunday of Lent – Rite of Election; catechumens are chosen for baptism that Easter

3rd, 4th, 5th Sundays of Lent – Scrutinies – the Great Lenten Gospels:

- Jn. 4 Woman at well WATER LIVING WATER
- Jn. 9 Man born blind LIGHT SPIRITUAL SIGHT
- Jn. 11 Raising Lazarus LIFE ETERNAL LIFE

Principal Lenten activities: Prayer // Fasting // Almsgiving (charitable works)

PRAYER

- Prayer draws us closer to the Lord.
- Pray for God's help in living out our baptismal promises
- Pray for the Elect who are to be baptized
- Pray for the community, the needy, the sick, etc.

FASTING

- Old Testament period – fasting appears in various contexts: with prayer for a purpose (e.g., drought relief); as a sign of repentance; during a mourning period; preparing for a divine revelation (e.g., Moses, Daniel); on the Day of Atonement
- In New Testament times, there was no requirement for Jews or Christians to fast; it was an ascetic practice among Essene communities
- Early Church – fasting not widespread until 4th Cent.
- Short pre-Easter fast gradually expanded from 2 to 40 days
- Post-Vatican II – 2 fast days: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, with encouragement to prolong the latter until the celebration of the Easter Vigil
- Fast – one full meal, two lesser meals, nothing between meals; ages 18-59
- Fasting – more than food deprivation; choose less of one thing to do a greater good; e.g., less TV time – more prayer or spiritual reading; less spending – more to charities; less negativity – more kindness; less apathy – more involvement

ABSTINENCE

- Not eating meat as a penitential practice; a spiritual link to the poor, who cannot afford meat often. Not just meatless meals, but sparse and simple meals. Eating lobster instead of steak misses the point.
- Ash Wednesday and Fridays following, until Easter. Applies to ages 14 and up.

ALMSGIVING (Charitable Works)

- Sign of our care for the needy
- Expression of gratitude for all God has given us
- Works of charity and promoting justice are integral to the Christian way of life

Other Lenten Activities

- Ashes – symbol of repentance and conversion
- Stations of Cross – recall Passion and Death of Christ
- Palms – Passion (Palm) Sunday – recall Jesus' entry into Jerusalem; remind us of saints "wearing white robes and holding palm branches" (Rev. 7:9) – white robes: the baptized; palms: triumph over sin and death through baptism