

EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT LENT BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

The Great Fast or Lent - there are three others on the Byzantine calendar: before Christmas, before the Dormition (August 15) and before SS. Peter and Paul (June 29) - is the seven week period of preparation before the celebration of Pascha (Easter). It is like a retreat held by the whole Church: a time of spiritual renewal, a time of repentance.

Isn't Lent kind of morbid and negative?

Repentance is not "giving up": it is a turning back to God whom we realize is the very source and goal of our life. He is our life. By repentance we realize we aren't where we should be: we are far from our Father. Our happiness, our wholeness, our sense of identity, well-being and joy flow from being close to God as the very center of our lives. So Lent, the time for repentance, is the time to rediscover this truth, to be convinced of it and make it more of a conscious reality in our everyday lives. In Pascha, the Easter mystery, Christ gives us a chance to be "born again" as children of God: as complete men and women possessing the life, grace and joy of God which completes and heals our nature as human beings.

Where did Lent come From?

The early Christians kept vigil during the last few days of Holy Week. As time went on, the vigil was extended to approximately forty days. It was a period in which the catechumens (candidates to become Christians) were given a last, intensive preparation for baptism, chrismation and the Eucharist. It was also the time when the penitents ("big time" sinners, such as lapsed Christians) did penance, relearning the basic and beautiful lesson of the mystery and dignity of being a Christian and our way of life in the Lord. They were reconciled with the rest of the faithful at the end of Lent. Since the season was a type of "boot-camp" in Christianity for the catechumens and penitents, all the faithful entered into the instructions, prayers, fasting and preparation as well as a type of renewal and "refresher course" in their own living of the new life in Christ given to us at Pascha.

But why the big interest in 40 days?

The number calls up memories from our past as a people of God. It reminds us of the forty years Israel wandered in the desert. As they were led by God to the Promised Land, they were tested, their faith was strengthened and they learned to know the Lord as the very center of their lives. In the same way during Lent we are tested, our faith is deepened and we move toward the fullness of the heavenly Kingdom, which is our inheritance.

The number also speaks to us of the forty days Jesus spent in the desert after His baptism, when He resisted temptation, giving Himself to a close communion with His Father, the source of His life. As He embraced His mission as His Father's servant and our redeemer during that time, so we try to take our own mission as Christians more seriously during Lent.

Finally, the forty days call to mind Moses and Elijah, who spent that amount of time preparing for important encounters with God. We too will encounter Him in His paschal mysteries where He reveals to us who He is, how He loves us, who we are and the real meaning of life.

So what should I do during Lent?

Don't "do": rather "be" a Lenten Christian. Live a Lenten style of life. Remember the basics: you are trying to turn more fully to God (repentance) and taste more fully the beauty and dignity that are yours as a child of God. You must think about that - which means eliminating some distractions - and seriously turn to Him. The Church has three traditional helps for this: fasting, prayer and almsgiving.

Why this three (fasting, prayer and almsgiving)?

They are recommended by the Scriptures and Tradition. They get to the very root of repentance, which is turning back to God. They help strip away the glitter of a false self, a false view of the world and others (secularism) and aid in discovering our true identity, our relation to God, others, the world and ourselves. Fasting helps us discover our true

hunger for God at the root of our being and our total dependence on Him as the source of our life and strength. Serious prayer puts us in communion with Him. Almsgiving helps us share God, His gifts and ourselves with others, establishing a true communion with them in the Lord.

What's this about fasting?

The reason for giving up something is that something better may take its place: especially the things of God. We fast so that we may "lay aside all earthly cares, that we may receive the King of all ". Does your life depend on food? You must eat to live, but no matter how much you eat, you are going to die. Life depends not on food, but on God, the Giver of Life. We fast to experience that on a deep level. Fasting has been prescribed by Christ Himself. The Church can and should remove from the realm of obligation this or that exercise of fasting, but the Church **cannot dispense us from Christ's command to fast**. We must each comply with that command as best we can. And, of course, the abstaining from food should lead to an abstaining from sin and evil intentions.

Then what does fasting mean in practice?

In practice, fasting is expressed through abstaining from certain foods for certain times. To follow our usual Eastern program of fasting would mean:

1. - **Abstaining from all food and drink** from midnight until noon on all weekdays:
and
2. - **Not eating any meat or dairy products** during the whole time of Lent.

The minimum asked by our Church for Lent is that we keep this fast on at least the following days: the first day of Great Lent and the last three days of the Great Week (abstinence from meat applies to **all** Fridays of the year). As an intermediate step, some people are accustomed to observe the entire first week, the whole of Great Week and every Wednesday and Friday.

Each family or individual should understand why we fast (the spiritual purpose, pray over it and then decide what is to be done in this regard during the holy season.

And the almsgiving?

God gave us material gifts as gifts over which we are to be responsible stewards. You are to use those gifts - and the gifts that you are - sacramentally. All things are potentially sacramental, since they are intended for communion with God and with each other. When we share the goods of the earth in love, we are "in communion", in fellowship in and with the Lord.

How are you handling your material possessions? They are not ends in themselves, but they are to produce that communion. Are they? Look around you, and the Lord will show you how to give alms, and exactly what you should share. One idea is to save the money gained by fasting and use it for charitable purposes.

That sounds great - when do we start?

We already have started: you have been thinking about it for quite a while. And the church too has a time of preparation for Lent, when it "primes the pump". giving us ideas, motivation and direction for Lent. For four Sundays before Lent starts we think about our need for God, about repentance and fasting, God's judgment and our need to forgive one another.

Lent actually begins on Clean Monday, the day after the last of these pre-Lenten Sundays, Cheese-Fare Sunday. And since the Church day always begins at sunset, our first Lenten service is on Sunday evening. We have the beautiful Forgiveness Vespers, at which we are reconciled with each other before beginning the Lenten journey and usually have the opportunity for the sacrament of penance.

What about Ash Wednesday?

We don't have Ash Wednesday. The Western Church begins the holy season on Wednesday with their proper services. The Eastern Churches start two days earlier because we use a different counting system to arrive at the traditional forty days.

The Western Lent consists of forty days excluding Sundays - leading up to Easter Sunday. The Eastern Churches keep forty days without interruption leading up to Lazarus Saturday, the first day of Holy Week. This accounts for the different starting dates.