

# LENTEN TRADITIONS – HISTORY and EXPLANATIONS

The Church has many rich traditions that are very old and consequently full of meaning and special significance. The season of Lent contains many of these. An examination of the history and meaning behind some of these traditions can make Lent a very interesting, positive and hopeful experience.

## LENT



Lent is a special time of prayer, penance, sacrifice and good works in preparation of the celebration of Easter. The word Lent comes from the old Anglo-Saxon words *lencten* which means **spring** and *lenctentid* which means **springtide**, and is also the word for **March**, the month in which much of Lent always occurs.

References to a time of preparation for Easter can be found as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, but it was only after Christianity was legalised in AD 313 that there was some effort to regularise it. The number 40 became prominent early in reference to the duration of the season being 40 days. In 461, Pope Leo made Lent more official throughout the Church. Since then, it has evolved over time to what we experience today. When Lent arrives, we are entering into an ancient practice.

Of course, there are a few well known facts about Lent. It begins with Ash Wednesday and lasts for forty days. People get ashes. We are encouraged to “give up things we like”. Lent concludes with Holy Week, and the Sacred Triduum of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil.

There are many more interesting traditions about Lent. Here are a few.

## ASHES



Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. Catholics receive ashes on that day either at their Parish Church or in a facility where a large community is gathered, such as a school. The priest or special minister puts ashes on one's forehead in the form of a cross while saying either: ***Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return*** or ***Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel.***

Ashes have been a traditional sign of penitence (sorrow) for a long time, certainly before the time of Jesus. People used to wear them to show sorrow for their sins, or to mourn the death of a loved one. To show sorrow, a person would wear rough cloth, called sackcloth, and then dust him/ herself with ashes. That's why we wear them on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday. The ashes become a visible sign to others that we acknowledge our sinfulness and are preparing for our saviour's resurrection and new life. Do you know from where our ashes come? Palms from the previous year are burned to become the ashes for the new season. Because the palms have already been blessed, the ashes are a special symbol.

## 40 DAYS



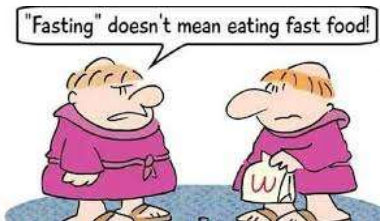
Lent lasts for forty days. It turns out that forty wasn't chosen at random. Traditionally, 40 represented a period of trial or testing. It symbolized a period of time to judge behavior. It represented the time for a new generation of people to arise. 40 days of Lent is a time for us today to prepare for Easter through our actions and the way we live our lives.

There is another reason that the number 40 is special. It appears several times in the Bible. God flooded the earth by having it rain for 40 days and nights. Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights receiving the commandments.

The Israelites wandered for 40 years in the desert. Moses sent spies, for 40 days, to investigate the Promised Land. Jesus was tempted by the devil in the desert for 40 days. He appeared to his disciples for 40 days after his resurrection from the dead. These are only a few.

The Biblical significance of the number 40 has extended into our modern secular world. Ever heard these expressions: life begins at forty? Forty winks? Ruby wedding anniversary (forty years)? Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves? the forty-hour work week? How special the number forty is!

## FAST & ABSTINENCE



Traditionally, fasting refers to eating habits. Strictly speaking, it means doing without food and drink. Generally, it has meant eating only bread and drinking water, and limited amounts at that. It has been a method of showing penitence and self-sacrifice for many years, certainly long before Christianity.

The practice has changed over the years. In recent times, fasting has meant having one full meal, two small snacks and nothing in between on a particular day. Closely related to fasting is the practice of abstinence, when meat is not eaten.

Rules for fasting vary from country to country. For many years, Fridays were considered fast days in the Church. This is still a tradition for some people. Certain feast days throughout the year are fast days, as are Good Friday, Ash Wednesday and Fridays in Lent. Abstinence on Fridays was required until after Vatican II in the 1960s. Recently, people have been asked to substitute this with another "sacrifice" on Fridays. It is still required on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and Fridays in Lent. The connection of fasting and abstinence to Fridays is pretty obvious: Christ died on Good Friday.

## ALMSGIVING



One of the important traditional Lenten practices is called "almsgiving". The meaning is simple: giving to the poor and needy. Jesus teaches us to do this always, but it has had a special role in Lent. Why?

Almsgiving allows you to give away something important, so you are sacrificing and "giving up" at the same time. Donating to the needy has been a common practice for a long time and is certainly something encouraged throughout the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments.

How can you give to the poor? The best way to give alms this Lent is to support the Holy Childhood Association (HCA) at your school or Parish. Organize some fundraising activities. Money sent to the HCA will benefit needy children. In addition, you could support local food banks and the St Vincent de Paul Society in your parish.

## STATIONS OF THE CROSS



The Stations of the Cross are prayerful reconstructions of the road Jesus took to Calvary on Good Friday. They are especially relevant during Lent. All Catholic churches have artistic representations of the Stations mounted somewhere on the interior walls. Do you know where they are in your Church? Usually, there is a procession around the Church from one station to the next, a short description of the station is read, a prayer is read at each, a verse from the hymn Stabat Mater is sung at the end of each station. It is usually simple, meaningful and relaxing.

Traditionally, there are 14 Stations of the Cross. In recent years, a 15<sup>th</sup> has been added that celebrates the Resurrection. There are also other versions of the Stations that have appeared.

Did you know that the HCA has missionary Stations of the Cross? Download them from the HCA site, and use them in your home, school or parish.

## RECONCILIATION



The Sacrament of Reconciliation and forgiveness are both central to traditional Lenten practice in our Church. God is merciful and always willing to forgive. Jesus will forgive minor faults if we pray and ask him. However, for serious offences the way to be forgiven is through the sacrament of Reconciliation. While it is relatively easy to ask for forgiveness through prayer, it takes trust, courage and humility to take the effort to go to Confession, or Reconciliation. Not sure if you need to go to Confession? Reconciliation always strengthens your relationship with God, no matter what your faults.

The Church asks us to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation at least once a year. Is this a difficult demand? Today, Reconciliation is less about only “confessing” than making up with God. It makes sense to do this during Lent, when we are preparing so hard for Jesus’ Resurrection. It can make you feel good and it’s really pretty easy! Saturday has traditionally been the day when Confession, or Reconciliation, is available in most churches. However, in Lent there are usually opportunities to go more often. There may even be a chance to go at school: priests often come over for a few hours for children who have made their first confession.

The penance given by the priest is the public atonement in the presence of God for our sins. God always forgives, but we need to show the community that we accept his forgiveness. That is the role of the penance we receive. In “olden days”, penance was more like punishment, and could be harsh and difficult. Today, it is more “symbolic” than before, but nevertheless significant. After all, prayers can be easy, but are they sincere?

## PURPLE



Another visible sign of Lent in most Parishes is the colour purple. It is the dominant “household” colour in our Church during both Lent and Advent. Purple has been used historically as a symbolic colour for mourning. During our Lenten preparations, we mourn the passion and death of Jesus.

Have you noticed the colour purple in your Church? You may have noticed the following: the priest often wears purple vestments, the altar has some purple coverings, the lectern has purple cloth hangings, the book of the Word has a purple cover and crucifixes and statues are covered in purple shrouds.

It looks noticeably different! So, why cover everything?

Seeing all of the purple “decorations” in the Church serves to remind us not only of mourning for Jesus passion, but of our Lenten preparations and promises that we have made. The purple colour reminds us to ask God for help with our Lenten practices. The coverings make everything else less distracting.

In ancient times, purple had ties to kings and queens, and was often reserved for only high caste people. The Persian king Cyrus and Roman emperors wore purple royal uniforms. In the Byzantine Empire, rulers wore purple robes and signed edicts in purple ink. Apparently, for many years, purple dye was rare, and thus reserved for royalty. How does this connect with Jesus?

When Jesus was led away to be crucified, he was clothed in a purple robe (Mark 15:17; John 19:2). This piece of clothing is a mocking symbol of Jesus sovereignty and royalty. On Good Friday, the purple shroud is removed, revealing our crucified King who will rise on Easter. At the Easter Vigil, the veils are taken off all of the statues, as our King is revealed.

## SACRIFICE (GIVING UP)



Sacrifice means a loss or something one gives up, usually for the sake of a better cause. In the Church, it is something between a person and God. Traditionally, doing without things that we like during Lent has been a standard way of preparing for Easter.

Giving up something has to be a sacrifice. It should hurt. It needs to be difficult. It has to be something one really doesn't want to be without, but should not be something that is necessary for you. It

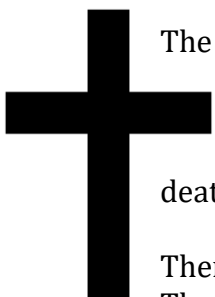
should turn one's mind and heart toward the suffering of Jesus. If it doesn't do this, what kind of preparation is being made?

Some common things for young people to give up during Lent have been types of food, candies and sweets, bad habits, TV shows, soft drinks and pop, social media, You Tube (or equivalent), movies, computer games. Adults have included smoking, alcohol, coffee.

Why not make it extraordinary and more interesting by adding some special challenges? For example, give up time. Spend free time helping more around the house, doing some extra homework and study, helping some neighbours, especially elderly and needy people, visiting an aged care facility and cheering up the older people. Say extra prayers. Go to Mass during the week.

## THE CROSS

One of the most obvious symbols of Lent, and of the Catholic Church itself, is the Cross! Obviously, everyone knows that the cross has symbolism to Jesus' death.



The cross is the most recognised symbol of Christianity and represents the crucifixion of Jesus. Did you know that there is a difference between a cross and a crucifix? The latter has a figure of Jesus body on it, whereas a cross does not. The cross has become a symbol of Jesus as well as the Christian people. What was once a sign of fear and death is now a sign of hope and life.

There are many cross designs, and they all have special meaning. We use the Latin Cross. The taller vertical section represents our relationship and reaching out to God. The horizontal section represents Jesus stretching out his arms to humanity and represents our relationship with others.