

Aspects of Lent

What got me started on this is what usually gets me started on such things – looking up a word in the dictionary, in this case the word ‘Lent’. It turns out, and I don’t think I had realised this before, that it comes from Middle/Old English (*lente/lencten*) and Germanic (*lang-*) referring to the lengthening days of spring. The Saxons called March *lenctern monath* because during that month the days noticeably lengthened. So, in that sense, it was initially a seasonal time on the calendar rather than a religious or liturgical time of the year.

That led me on to look things up in a number of other sources¹ from which I will borrow heavily in offering the following combination of information which I hope will prove informative. Maybe you already know most of this, maybe you don’t - we’ll see.

Lent is the name given to the forty-day period of prayer, fasting and penance, between Ash Wednesday and Easter. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says that Lent lasts from Ash Wednesday to the Mass of the Lord’s Supper (on Maundy Thursday) exclusive - which means that Ash Wednesday and the three days of the *Easter triduum* are not part of Lent.

[My comment: It really doesn’t matter exactly how many days there are in Lent and which days they are. The point is to use whatever time there is in the way it is intended – for our personal spiritual growth and as a penitential season in preparation for Easter.]

On Ash Wednesday it is traditional to be signed on the forehead with ashes (obtained from burning the previous year’s palms). In various places in the Old Testament, reference is made to wearing sackcloth and being covered with ashes as a public sign of mourning and sorrow, and an external sign of sorrow and penance for sin. It is in this regard that the Church has traditionally marked the beginning of the season of Lent with the blessing and distribution of ashes as a sign of our sorrow and repentance for sin.

[A personal comment: Recognising and appreciating the meaning behind the action suggests the inappropriateness of presenting innocent babies and small children to be anointed with ashes. Not only do they not understand what it is they are doing (as an adult would), but, more importantly, what sins do they have to be sorry for?] [People’s response to what I have just said may depend on how well they have understood the symbolism of receiving the ashes. This past Ash Wednesday, three people came to me after Mass to ask for the ashes; they hadn’t arrived for Mass in time to receive communion, but were intent on receiving the ashes. There’s almost a superstition involved – that it’s Ash Wednesday and therefore we must receive the ashes. What might that be

¹ *Virtues Catholic Encyclopedia; A-Z of the Catholic Church; Cassell Dictionary of Christianity; and The Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church.*

saying about their understanding of what receiving the ashes is all about, especially when Mass and communion should have been a priority?]

In the first centuries of the Church only two days – Good Friday and Holy Saturday – were observed as days of penance and fasting. This was then extended to the whole of Holy Week, then to the three weeks leading up to Easter, and later still to all six weeks before Easter. One source says that since Sundays were never days of fasting, this amounted to only thirty-six days and so a further four days were added in imitation of Our Lord’s fast of forty days in the desert.

[My own comment: The point about Sundays not counting as part of the Lenten fast is something I have heard people claim and yet I always ignored it as being the invention of those who were looking for any excuse to take even a one-day break from whatever it was that they had decided to give up for Lent. If the encyclopaedia is correct then perhaps they were right after all. Indeed it would seem to be backed up by scripture when you stop and think about it. In the ‘Prayer of the Church’ for the Sundays of Lent, the scripture reading for Morning Prayer is taken from the prophet Nehemiah (8 v 9-10) and reads: *This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep. For this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength* – which would seem to suggest that the Sundays of Lent (as with all Sundays) are not meant to be days of fasting, but days of joy and celebration.]

Lent was traditionally divided into two parts: *Quadragesima* (from Ash Wednesday until the Saturday before Passion Sunday) and *Passiontide* (from Passion Sunday until the evening of Holy Saturday.)

[My own comment: Passion Sunday used to be two weeks before Easter then followed by Palm Sunday, whereas the two Sundays are now combined and celebrated on the last Sunday before Easter. This accounts for why, in the Ordo, there is still an instruction that if it is the custom, crosses and images may be covered from what is now the Fifth Sunday of Lent – two weeks before Easter and a week before Palm Sunday when we enter into the Passion (and Holy Week) on our modern calendar.]

The Fourth Sunday of Lent was traditionally known as *Laetare Sunday* – the word *laetare* (“rejoice”) being the first word of the Opening Prayer of the Mass (the Introit, as it was called). The priest used to wear a rose coloured vestment instead of purple (now no longer the practice) to emphasise the more joyful aspect of the day. In the early Church, the Lenten fast did not begin until the following day and so this Sunday was a joyful celebration before the penitence of Lent began. Later, when the fast was extended, *Laetare Sunday* was seen as a sort of mid-Lent “relaxation” from our penitential efforts – “day off”.

The Fourth Sunday also happens to be *Mothering Sunday* (Mother’s Day) said to derive from the pre-Reformation custom of people visiting their cathedral or

mother church on that day; or from the custom of children who were away from home – especially daughters in service – visiting their mothers and families on this day; or from the various references to motherhood in the reading from Galatians (4 v 22-31) which was the epistle for the day in the old missal.

The original purpose of Lent was as a period of final preparation for catechumens (those receiving instruction in the faith) prior to their baptism at Easter. For everyone else, as a preparation for Easter, it was a time of penance and alms-giving. Public penitents (as was the custom) were excluded from the Church from Ash Wednesday until Maundy Thursday. In Rome penitential processions took place daily during Lent, ending each day at the church of a different saint or martyr as part of the eighty-four *station days* of the year – days of fasting until the end of Mass. (The word *station* was from the Latin meaning “to stand” – because the days involved walking and standing.)

In the early centuries, observance of the Lenten fast was very rigid: only one meal a day was allowed and meat and fish were both forbidden. In the West the fast was gradually relaxed until it applied only to Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and fish could be eaten.

[These final paragraphs are my own thoughts.]

More recently the law governing these two days of fast and abstinence were relaxed still further. Those of us “of a certain age”, as they say, will be familiar with the requirements still current in Canon Law: Fasting means taking only one full meal though some nourishment (restricted in quantity and quality) may also be taken in the morning and evening; eating between meals is not permitted. The law of abstinence forbids the eating of meat but not fish (though meat flavoured soups are permitted).

Our *Diocesan Year Book*, however, contains the current guidelines of our Bishops’ Conference (which has authority to make its own interpretations and decisions in this matter). Fasting, it says, means that the amount of food we eat should be considerably reduced (but it doesn’t include specific details regarding by how much), and abstinence means that we give up a particular kind of food (without specifying which) or some form of amusement. It all seems a lot more lenient than it used to be and, perhaps, a little confusing. I think, rather than allowing that to be an excuse for doing little or nothing, it invites us to enter into the spirit of what fasting and abstinence are about on these two days in particular, and to make our decisions maturely out of a freedom of choice rather than blind obedience to the letter of the law.

No different decision, however, seems to have been made in terms of who must observe the requirements of fasting and abstaining – and their observance is obligatory. Canon Law says that the law of fasting applies to those who have

attained their majority, until the beginning of their sixtieth year - in other words those aged 18-59. Abstinence applies to those who have completed their fourteenth year, ie/ 14 years of age and older. Reasons of ill-health, pregnancy, etc, may excuse of course. Other forms of penance may be chosen by those who are excused or who are not obliged in law.

The Church continues to teach the need to observe Lent as a time of penance, self-denial, and alms-giving – but also for devoting more time than usual to spiritual exercises. This introduces a dimension to Lent that people don't always consider, that of doing something extra (especially spiritually) rather than giving something up. This option shouldn't be embraced simply as an excuse for not practising some degree of self-denial and penance, both of which continue to be important. It should, however, be seen as an opportunity to make Lent a more positive time of personal spiritual growth and development – something which then hopefully becomes a permanent part of our spiritual lives rather than simply being restricted to Lent. It may also help us to welcome Lent rather than dreading its approach!

A final point, and one often overlooked (or, sadly, ignored) is the fact that the Sacrament of Reconciliation (or 'Confession') is not celebrated during what is called the *Easter triduum* – the final three days of Holy Week. There are six weeks of Lent in which, appropriately, to celebrate the sacrament of penance. With the celebration of the 'Mass of the Lord's Supper' on Maundy Thursday - and its anticipation of the passion and death of Christ - the Church is considered sacramentally "dead" with Christ in the tomb. This is also why we don't celebrate Mass on Good Friday, communion being offered using hosts (only) consecrated the previous day. No sacraments are celebrated until the Easter Vigil when - in liturgical sign and symbol - we commemorate the fact that Christ is risen.

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