

# *History of Lent*

## **What does the word mean?**

- The word *Lent* itself is derived from the Anglo-Saxon words *lencten*, meaning "Spring," and *lenctentid*, which literally means not only "Springtide" but also was the word for "March," the month in which the majority of Lent falls.

## **History**

- Since the earliest times of the Church, there is evidence of some kind of Lenten preparation for Easter.
  - For instance, St. Irenaeus (d. 203) wrote to Pope St. Victor I, commenting on the celebration of Easter and the differences between practices in the East and the West: "The dispute is not only about the day, but also about the actual character of the fast. Some think that they ought to fast for one day, some for two, others for still more; some make their 'day' last 40 hours on end. Such variation in the observance did not originate in our own day, but very much earlier, in the time of our forefathers" (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, V, 24).
    - When Rufinus translated this passage from Greek into Latin, the punctuation made between "40" and "hours" made the meaning to appear to be "40 days, twenty-four hours a day."
    - The importance of the passage, nevertheless, remains that since the time of "our forefathers" -- always an expression for the apostles -- a 40-day period of Lenten preparation existed. However, the actual practices and duration of Lent were still not homogenous throughout the Church.
- Lent becomes more regularized after the legalization of Christianity in A.D. 313.
  - The Council of Nicea (325), in its disciplinary canons, noted that two provincial synods should be held each year, "one before the 40 days of Lent."
  - St. Athanasius (d. 373) in his "Festal Letters" implored his congregation to make a 40-day fast prior to the more intense fasting of Holy Week.
  - St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) in his *Catechetical Lectures*, which are the paradigm for our current RCIA programs, had 18 pre-baptismal instructions given to the catechumens during Lent.
    - St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) in his series of "Festal Letters" also noted the practices and duration of Lent, emphasizing the 40-day period of fasting.
    - Finally, Pope St. Leo (d. 461) preached that the faithful must "fulfill with their fasts the Apostolic institution of the 40 days," again noting the apostolic origins of Lent.
    - **One can safely conclude that by the end of the fourth century, the 40-day period of Easter preparation known as Lent existed, and that prayer and fasting constituted its primary spiritual exercises.**

## What does the fast look like?

- How long?

- In Jerusalem, for instance, people fasted for 40 days, Monday through Friday, but not on Saturday or Sunday, thereby making Lent last for eight weeks.
- In Rome and in the West, people fasted for six weeks, Monday through Saturday, thereby making Lent last for six weeks.
- **Eventually, the practice prevailed of fasting for six days a week over the course of six weeks, and Ash Wednesday was instituted to bring the number of fast days before Easter to 40.**

- What to fast from?

- First, some areas of the Church abstained from all forms of meat and animal products, while others made exceptions for food like fish.
  - For example, Pope St. Gregory (d. 604), writing to St. Augustine of Canterbury, issued the following rule: "We abstain from flesh, meat, and from all things that come from flesh, as milk, cheese and eggs."
- Second, the general rule was for a person to have one meal a day, in the evening or at 3 p.m.
- Eventually, a smaller repast was allowed during the day to keep up one's strength from manual labor. Eating fish was allowed, and later eating meat was also allowed through the week except on Ash Wednesday and Friday.
- Dispensations were given for eating dairy products if a pious work was performed, and eventually this rule was relaxed totally (this is the reason for eggs on Easter though!)

## Today, things have been simplified:

- On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, the faithful fast (having only one full meal a day and smaller snacks to keep up one's strength - (18-59)) and abstain from meat; on the other Fridays of Lent, the faithful abstain from meat (14+).
- People are still encouraged "to give up something" for Lent as a sacrifice.
- An interesting note is that technically on Sundays and solemnities like St. Joseph's Day (March 19) and the Annunciation (March 25), one is exempt and can partake of whatever has been offered up for Lent.