

ALL ABOUT LENT

by James Akin

Q: What is Lent?

A: Lent is the forty day period before Easter, excluding Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday (the day before Easter Sunday). [This traditional enumeration does not precisely coincide with the calendar according to the liturgical reform. In order to give special prominence to the Sacred Triduum (Mass of the Lord's Supper, Good Friday, Easter Vigil) the current calendar counts Lent as only from Ash Wednesday to Holy Thursday, up to the Mass of the Lord's Supper. Even so, Lenten practices are properly maintained up to the Easter Vigil, excluding Sundays, as before.]

Q: Why are Sundays excluded from the reckoning of the forty days?

A: Because Sunday is the day on which Christ arose, making it an inappropriate day to fast and mourn our sins. On Sunday we must celebrate Christ's resurrection for our salvation. It is Friday on which we commemorate his death for our sins. The Sundays of the year are days of celebration and the Fridays of the year are days of penance.

Q: Why are the forty days called Lent?

A: They are called Lent because that is the Old English word for spring, the season of the year during which they fall. This is something unique to English. In almost all other languages its name is a derivative of the Latin term *Quadragesima*, or "the forty days."

Q: Why is Lent forty days long?

A: Because forty days is a traditional number of discipline, devotion, and preparation in the Bible. Thus Moses stayed on the Mountain of God forty days (Exodus 24:18 and 34:28), the spies were in the land for forty days (Numbers 13:25), Elijah traveled forty days before he reached the cave where he had his vision (1 Kings 19:8), Nineveh was given forty days to repent (Jonah 3:4), and most importantly, prior to undertaking his ministry, Jesus spent forty days in wilderness praying and fasting (Matthew 4:2).

Since Lent is a period of prayer and fasting, it is fitting for Christians to imitate their Lord with a forty day period. Christ used a forty day period of prayer and fasting to prepare for his ministry, which culminated in his death and resurrection, and thus it is fitting for Christians to imitate him with a forty day period of prayer and fasting to prepare for the celebration of his ministry's climax, Good Friday (the day of the crucifixion) and Easter Sunday (the day of the resurrection).

Thus the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

"For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sinning' [Heb 4:15]. By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert." (CCC 540).

Q: When does Lent begin?

A: Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, which is the day on which they faithful have their foreheads signed with ashes in the form of a Cross (see piece on Ash Wednesday). It is also a day of fast and abstinence.

Q: What is a day of fast and abstinence?

A: Under current canon law in the Western Rite of the Church, a day of fast is one on which Catholics who are eighteen to sixty years old are required to keep a limited fast. In this country, one may eat a single, normal meal and have two snacks, so long as these snacks do not add up to a second meal. Children are not required to fast, but their parents must ensure they are properly educated in the spiritual practice of fasting. Those with medical conditions requiring a greater or more regular food intake can easily be dispensed from the requirement of fasting by their pastor.

A day of abstinence is a day on which Catholics fourteen years or older are required to abstain from eating meat (under the current discipline in America, fish, eggs, milk products, and condiments or foods made using animal fat are permitted in the Western Rite of the Church, though not in the Eastern Rites.) Again, persons with special dietary needs can easily be dispensed by their pastor.

Q: Is there a biblical basis for abstaining from meat as a sign of repentance?

A: Yes. The book of Daniel states:

"In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia . . . 'I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.'" (Daniel 10:1-3)

Q: Isn't abstaining from meat one of the "doctrines of demons" Paul warned about in 1 Timothy 4:1-5?

A: Short answer: Not unless Daniel was practicing a doctrine of demons.

Long answer: When Paul warned of those who "forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods" he has in mind people with the Manichean belief that sex is wrong and certain foods, like meat, are intrinsically immoral. (Thus the spiritual ideal for many modern New Agers is a celibate vegetarian, as in the Eastern religions.)

We know that Paul has in mind those who teach sex and certain foods are intrinsically immoral because he tells us that these are "foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:3b-5).

Sex and all kinds of food are good things (which is why the Catholic Church has marriage for a sacrament and heartily recommends the practice eating to its members), and this is precisely why it is fitting for them to be given up as part of a spiritual discipline. Thus Daniel gave up meat (as well as wine, another symbol of rejoicing) and Paul endorses the practice of temporary celibacy to engage in a special spiritual discipline of increased prayer (1 Corinthians 7:5). By giving up good things and denying them to ourselves we encourage an attitude of humility, free ourselves from dependence on them, cultivate the spiritual discipline of being willing to make personal sacrifices, and remind ourselves of the importance of spiritual goods over earthly goods.

In fact, if there was an important enough purpose, Paul recommended permanently giving up marriage and meat. Thus he himself was celibate (1 Corinthians 7:8), he recommended the same for ministers (2 Timothy 2:3-4), and he recommended it for the unmarried so they can devote themselves more fully to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:32-34) unless doing so would subject them to great temptations (1 Corinthians 7:9). Similarly, he recommended giving up meat permanently if it would prevent others from sinning (1 Corinthians 8:13).

Thus Paul certainly had nothing against celibacy or giving up meat—even on a permanent basis—so long as one wasn't saying that these things are intrinsically evil, which is what he was condemning the "doctrines of demons" passage.

Since the Catholic Church only requires abstinence from meat on a temporary basis, it clearly does not regard meat as immoral. Instead, it regards it as the giving up of a good thing (which in less economically developed regions—including the whole world until very recently—was expensive and thus eaten at festive occasions, making it a sign of rejoicing) to attain a spiritual goal.

Q: On what basis does the Church have the authority to establish days of fast and abstinence?

A: On the authority of Jesus Christ. Jesus told the leaders of his Church, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19, 18:18). The language of binding and loosing (in part) was a rabbinic way of referring to the ability to establish binding halakah or rules of conduct for the faith community. It is thus especially appropriate that the references to binding and loosing occur in Matthew, the "Jewish Gospel." Thus the Jewish Encyclopedia states:

"BINDING AND LOOSING (Hebrew, asar ve-hittir) . . . Rabbinical term for 'forbidding and permitting.' . . . "The power of binding and loosing as always claimed by the Pharisees. Under Queen Alexandra the Pharisees, says Josephus (Wars of the Jews 1:5:2), 'became the administrators of all public affairs so as to be empowered to banish and readmit whom they pleased, as well as to loose and to bind.' . . . The various schools had the power 'to bind and to loose'; that is, to forbid and to permit (Talmud: Chagigah 3b); and they could also bind any day by declaring it a fast-day (. . . Talmud: Ta'anit 12a . . .). This power and authority, vested in the rabbinical body of each age of the Sanhedrin, received its ratification and final sanction from the celestial court of justice (Sifra, Emor, 9; Talmud: Makkot 23b).

"In this sense Jesus, when appointing his disciples to be his successors, used the familiar formula (Matt. 16:19, 18:18). By these words he virtually invested them with the same authority as that which he found belonging to the scribes and Pharisees who 'bind heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but will not move them with one of their fingers'; that is 'loose them,' as they have the power to do (Matt. 23:2-4). In the same sense the second epistle of Clement to James II ('Clementine Homilies,' Introduction [A.D. 221]), Peter is represented as having appointed Clement as his successor, saying: 'I communicate to him the power of binding and loosing so that, with respect to everything which he shall ordain in the earth, it shall be decreed in the heavens; for he shall bind what ought to be bound and loose what ought to be loosed as knowing the rule of the Church.'" (Jewish Encyclopedia 3:215).

Thus Jesus invested the leaders of this Church with the power of making halakah for the Christian community. This includes the setting of fast days (like Ash Wednesday).

To approach the issue from another angle, every family has the authority to establish particular family devotions for its members. Thus if the parents decide that the family will engage in a particular devotion at a particular time (say, Bible reading after supper), it is a sin for the children to disobey and skip the devotion for no good reason. In the same way, the Church as the family of God has the authority to establish its own family devotion, and it is a sin for the members of the Church to disobey and skip the devotions for no good reason (though of course if the person has a good reason, the Church dispenses him immediately).

Q: In addition to Ash Wednesday, are any other days during Lent days of fast or abstinence?

A: Yes. All Fridays during Lent are days of abstinence. Also, Good Friday, the day on which Christ was crucified, is another day of both fast and abstinence. All days in Lent are appropriate for fasting or abstaining, but canon law does not require fasting on those days. Such fasting or abstinence is voluntary, like a freewill offering.

Q: Why are Fridays during Lent days of abstinence.

A: This is because Jesus died for our sins on Friday, making it an especially appropriate day of mourning our sins (just as Sunday, the day on which he rose for our salvation is an especially appropriate day to rejoice) by denying ourselves something we enjoy. During the rest of the year Catholics in this country are permitted to use a different act of penance on Friday in place of abstinence, though all Fridays are days of penance on which we are required to do something expressing sorrow for our sins, just as Sundays are holy days on which we are required to worship and celebrate God's great gift of salvation.

Q: Are acts of repentance appropriate on other days during Lent?

A: Yes. Thus the Code of Canon Law states:

"All Fridays through the year and the time of Lent are penitential days and time throughout the universal Church" (CIC 1250).

Q: Why are acts of repentance appropriate at this time of year?

A: Because it is the time leading up to the commemoration of Our Lord's death for our sins and the commemoration of his resurrection for our salvation. It is thus especially appropriate to mourn the sins for which he died. Human have an innate psychological need to mourn tragedies, and our sins are tragedies of the greatest sort. Due to our fallen nature humans also have a need to have set times in which to engage in behavior (which is why we have Sundays as a set time to rest and worship, since we would otherwise be likely to forget to devote sufficient time to rest and worship), it is appropriate to have set times of repentance. Lent is one of those set times.

Q: What are appropriate activities for ordinary days during Lent?

A: Giving up something we enjoy for Lent, doing of physical or spiritual acts of mercy for others, prayer, fasting, abstinence, going to confession, and other acts expressing repentance in general.

Q: Is the custom of giving up something for Lent mandatory?

A: No. However, it is a salutary custom, and parents or caretakers may choose to require it of their children to encourage their spiritual training, which is their prime responsibility in the raising of their children.

Q: Since Sundays are not counted in the forty days of Lent, does the custom of giving up something apply to them?

A: Customarily, no. However, since the giving up of something is voluntary to begin with, there is no official rule concerning this aspect of it. Nevertheless, since Sundays are days of celebration, it is appropriate to suspend the Lenten self-denial on them that, in a spiritual and non-excessive way, we may celebrate the day of Our Lord's resurrection so that that day and that event may be contrasted with the rest of the days of Lent and the rest of the events of history. This heightened contrast deepens the spiritual lessons taught by the rest of Lent.

Q: Why is giving up something for Lent such a salutary custom?

A: By denying ourselves something we enjoy, we discipline our wills so that we are not slaves to our pleasures. Just as indulging the pleasure of eating leads to physical flabbiness and, if this is great enough, an inability to perform in physically demanding situations, indulging in pleasure in general leads to spiritual flabbiness and, if this is great enough, an inability to perform in spiritual demanding situations, we when the demands of morality require us to sacrifice something pleasurable (such as sex before marriage or not within the confines of marriage) or endure hardship (such as being scorned or persecuted for the faith). By disciplining the will to refuse pleasures when they are not sinful, a habit is developed which allows the will to refuse pleasures when they are sinful. There are few better ways to keep one's priorities

straight than by periodically denying ourselves things of lesser priority to show us that they are not necessary and focus our attention on what is necessary.

Q: Is the denying of pleasure an end in itself?

A: No. It is only a means to an end. By training ourselves to resist temptations when they are not sinful, we train ourselves to reject temptations when they are sinful. We also express our sorrow over having failed to resist sinful temptations in the past.

Q: Is there such a thing as denying ourselves too many pleasures?

A: Most definitely. First, God made human life contingent on certain goods, such as food, and to refuse to enjoy enough of them has harmful consequences. For example, if we do not eat enough food it can cause physical damage or (in the extreme, even death). Just as there is a balance between eating too much food and not eating enough food, there is a balance involved in other goods.

Second, if we do not strike the right balance and deny ourselves goods God meant us to have then it can generate resentment toward God, which is a spiritual sin just as much as those of engaging in excesses of good things. Thus one can be led into sin either by excess or by defect in the enjoyment of good things.

Third, it can decrease our effectiveness in ministering to others.

Fourth, it can deprive us of the goods God gave us in order that we might praise him.

Fifth, it constitutes the sin of ingratitude by refusing to enjoy the things God wanted us

to have because he loves us. If a child refused every gift his parent gave him, it would displease the parent, and if we refuse gifts God has given us, it displeases God because he loves us and wants us to have them.

Q: Is that balance the same for all people?

A: No. For example, with the good of food, people who are by nature physically larger need more food than people who are physically smaller. Similarly, people who have higher metabolisms or who do manual labor for a living need more food than people with slower metabolisms or who have less active lifestyles. The same is true with regard to other goods than food. The St. Paul speaks of this in regard to the good of married life:

"I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:7-9).

Thus some are given the gift of being able to live without the good of married life in order that they may pursue greater devotion to God (1 Cor. 7:32-34) or to pursue greater ministry for others (2 Timothy 2:3-4), as with priests, monks, and nuns. God gives these people special graces to live the life which they have embraced, just as he gives special graces to the married to live the life they have embraced.

Q: Aside from Ash Wednesday, which begins Lent, what are its principal events?

A: There are a variety of saints' days which fall during Lent, and some of these change from year to year since the dates of Lent itself change based on when Easter falls. However, the Sundays during the Lenten season commemorate special events in the life of Our Lord, such as his Transfiguration and his Triumphal Entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, which begins Holy Week. Holy week climaxes with Holy Thursday, on which Christ celebrated the first Mass, Good Friday, on which he was Crucified, and Holy Saturday—the last day of Lent—during which Our Lord lay in the Tomb before his Resurrection on Easter Sunday, the first day after Lent.

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