

## Faith in 5 – Adults Origins of Lenten Practices



1. **Lent** originated as a way for candidates to prepare for baptism, which was to take place at Easter. Historians agree that Lent, the 40-day period before Easter, appeared soon after the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. Earliest observances of Lent for intended converts focused on the practice of fasting during their period of repentance and reflection. Lent evolved into a general practice churchwide and was accepted as part of Sacred Tradition. Lent is a time of penance and prayer, compassion and selflessness.
2. Pope Gregory I (590 - 604) standardized the period of the **fast** churchwide, to begin on a Wednesday 46 days before Easter with a ceremony of ash, and not to include Sundays, which is recognized as a celebration of Jesus' resurrection.

By the 800s, the strictness of the fast began to relax. In the 1400s, Christians began eating the one meal earlier in the day, and later added a smaller meal to keep up their strength for work. New practices appeared, like the idea of giving up some luxury or need as a personal sacrifice for the season. Over time, "giving something up" became the centerpiece of Lent.

3. Many do not realize that Lent is actually a period of joy and preparation. Much has been focused on the negativity and somberness of the season, but we rejoice because we are given the opportunity for true repentance, and the grace to change our lives. God extends forgiveness to us and comes to us in our efforts to deepen a relationship with Him. This twofold dimension of Lent – joy and preparation – is elaborated in the Second Vatican Council's decree on the Liturgy ([Sacrosanctum concilium](#), 109-10).
4. The Council of Nicea described the period of preparation as 40 days before Easter. The significance of **40 days** holds great significance in the Bible. The number 40 is associated with testing and trial. Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days as he received the 10 Commandments (Exodus 24:38). Elijah walked for 40 days in the desert before reaching Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8), and Jesus spent 40 days in the desert being tempted by the devil before he began his ministry (Luke 4:1-13).
5. The pillars of Lent: **prayer, fasting and almsgiving** are expressions of the fundamental purpose of Lent. These activities encourage total reliance on God for our every need. The faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all practice the restriction of food with intense prayer and assistance to the poor for spiritual reasons ([Source](#)). In **prayer**, we intentionally draw close to God. Our fasting from food or habits helps us recognize no one but God fulfills us. In **almsgiving**, the focus is not on our need, but for the needs of others through the mercy of God. Almsgiving decreases our attachment to this world and strengthens our love of God and others through the giving of our time, talent and treasure.

During the fourth century, preparatory **fasting** was justified as a means for cleansing the body of impurities and atoning for sin. Over the years, the Church relaxed but did not abolish the rules on fasting and abstinence. Those between the ages of 18 and 59 in the Catholic Church are obliged to fast, limiting their daily meals to only one full meal, and two small snacks a day unless exempt due to age or medical necessity. The snacks are small enough that they do not add up to a full meal when put together. The Catholic Church limits only two days for fasting for Lent in our current day: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. On Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all Fridays of Lent, everyone of age 14 and up must abstain from consuming meat.

6. **Abstinence from meat** - In the 9th Century, Pope Nicholas I declared that believers should abstain from eating “flesh, blood, or marrow” on Fridays in memory of Christ’s death and crucifixion. Meat was considered an indulgence used for celebratory occasions in that time. Abstaining proved the willingness to sacrifice for God.
7. **Eating fish on Fridays** – One interesting explanation, “comes from the 15th century... “For when God, for Adam’s sin, cursed the earth and the land, he cursed not the water; wherefore it is lawful for a man to eat in Lent that which cometh of the water ([Source](#)).” The Church does not mention specifically to eat fish on Fridays. One theory is that since meat is considered warm blooded, and fish cold blooded, people consumed fish to replace meat.
8. **Purple** is the color of repentance and humility and plays a prominent role during this season. In Mark 15:16-20, the garment the guard placed on Jesus during his trial and beatings was purple. Thus, purple symbolizes pain, suffering, and mourning and penitence. It is also the color of royalty, of Jesus our King crucified.
9. **Shrove Tuesday** is often celebrated as the last day before Ash Wednesday, which begins the Lenten season.” Shrove is the past tense of the word shrive, which means to hear a confession, assign penance, and absolve from sin. In the Middle Ages, especially in Northern Europe and England, it became the custom to confess one’s sins on the day before Lent began in order to enter the penitential season in the right spirit.” Eventually, Shrove Tuesday became more festive in nature. “In preparation for Lent, early Christians celebrated with a carnival, (carne vale, literally a farewell to meat) and in anticipation of the dietary restrictions to come ([Source](#))” Also known as Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday, this was a time for people to indulge in foods that would be forbidden during Lent: eggs, milk and sugar. Pancakes, made of these ingredients were meant as a last indulgence and to use up these ingredients before Lent.
10. Marking the beginning of Lent, is **Ash Wednesday** - 46 days before Easter Sunday. During Mass, the priest will apply ashes to the heads of the faithful. This practice can be traced back to ancient Rome where penitent sinners dressed in sackcloth were sprinkled with ashes to start their period of public penance on the first day of Lent. Its roots are found in the Old Testament, where ashes symbolized mourning and penance (Esther 4:1, Job 42:6, Daniel 9:3, Jonah 3:5-6). A cross drawn in ash is applied upon the forehead, and

symbolizes the dust that God created us from. It is also a sacramental – a living sign to others that we are believers and followers of Christ.

The priest blesses the ashes and imposes them on the foreheads of the faithful, making the sign of the cross and saying, “Remember, man you are dust and to dust you shall return,” or “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel”. At the time of the eighth century, those who were about to die were laid on the ground on top of sackcloth sprinkled with ashes. The priest would bless the dying person with holy water, saying, “Remember that thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return” and ask the dying if they were content to go before the Lord in judgment, to which the reply “I am content” was spoken.

11. **Veiling images** – The practice of veiling images alerts us that something is different, as the last two weeks of Lent are a time of immediate preparation for the celebration of the Sacred Triduum. Covering images is still an option, and the rubrics in the Missal for the Fifth Sunday of Lent state: “In the Dioceses of the United States, the practice of covering crosses and images throughout the church from this Sunday may be observed. Crosses remain covered until the end of the Celebration of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday, but images remain covered until the beginning of the Easter Vigil”.

All statues and images except the Stations of the Cross and stained-glass windows are veiled. The custom of veiling the images during the last two weeks of Lent perhaps derived from a German custom from the ninth century, of the draping of a large cloth before the altar from the beginning of Lent. This cloth, called the “Hungertuch” (hunger cloth), hid the altar entirely from the faithful illiterate, to signify the season of Lent. Veiling church interiors directed the faithful minds to God’s call for a deeper interior life with his Son. Once uncovered and no longer veiled, this marked God’s triumphant love available to all.

12. Changes in the liturgy encourage the season’s somberness. The glorious and joyful aspects of the Liturgy, the **Gloria and the Alleluia** are omitted for the season. The Gloria is a rejoicing, “Glory to God in the Highest”; the Alleluia is the joyful expression, “Praise the Lord”. During Lent, we mourn our sinfulness and wait for the coming of the Messiah to save us, similar to the anticipation of Jesus’ birth during Advent. This simple, quiet atmosphere along with minimally decorated surroundings, inspire a greater meditation on Christ. The Gloria and Alleluia will resound with immense joy and triumphant praise at Easter vigil.

13. **Readings for Lent** focus on themes and events in salvation history from the Old Testament. Since ancient times, Lent was always a period where catechumens, those preparing to receive the Sacraments of Initiation - Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist - were being instructed in the basics of the faith. During Lent, we all now have the opportunity to hear the history of salvation in the first reading. The second reading generally highlights themes of repentance and sin. The Sunday Gospel readings during Lent reflect key events from Jesus’ life and focus on repentance and conversion.

**The first Sunday in Lent** focuses on the temptation of Jesus in the desert for 40 days. **The second Sunday Gospel** reading is always the Transfiguration, the last event prior to Jesus' journey towards the cross. Jesus is revealed as the Son of God who must suffer.

The Gospel of John is read during the Easter season in all three cycle years when celebrating the **Scrutinies of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)**. During these scrutinies, we witness and are invited to the blessings of encountering Christ.

**Third Sunday, First Scrutiny:** Woman at the Well (John 4:3-42). Jesus offers Himself as the Living Water.

**Fourth Sunday, Second Scrutiny:** The Man Born Blind (John 9:1-41). Jesus is the Light of the World.

**Fifth Sunday, Third Scrutiny:** Raising Lazarus from the Dead (John 11:1-14). Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life.

14. **Holy Week:** became distinct and focused on the last days of Christ's life on earth, followed by his resurrection. It is based on the chronological events as written in the Gospels. Palm Sunday begins Holy Week and moves to Holy Thursday or '**Maundy Thursday**' where Jesus gave instructions to his apostles at the Last Supper. Maundy, deriving from the Latin mandatum, (meaning commandment), "Mandatum novum do vobis": 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you' (John 13:34) ([Source](#)). The Institution of the Holy Eucharist commemorates the Last Supper which was the first Mass. "Do this in memory of me" was Jesus' act in [making his apostles ministerial priests](#) and establishing the priesthood. The Greek verb for "do," poieo, can be literally translated as "offer" in the sense of offering a sacrifice. Poieo is used five times in reference to Moses' offering, the sacrificial ritual for ordaining Aaron and his sons as priests. Water is always kept in the holy water fonts until after Mass on Holy Thursday, when they are emptied of holy water and later refilled with the water blessed at the Easter Vigil ([Paschales Solemnitatis 97](#)). **Good Friday** –described as good, because by His death, Christ became the complete sacrifice for our sins. This day was once called Good Friday of the Lord's Passion.
15. **Easter Fire:** The fire, made of dry wood, begins the liturgy of the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. The early Christians celebrated Easter in the middle of the night with a ceremony now called the Easter Vigil. Christ our Lord is the Light that breaks through the darkness of the world (John 1:5). The **Paschal Candle** may have roots in the ancient Christian service called Lucernarium, based on the Jewish lamp lighting rituals that preceded evening prayer time.
16. **Easter:** this is the annual celebration of the resurrection of Jesus to life after His crucifixion and death, also known as Resurrection Sunday. Though there are many thoughts on the origin of the word Easter, confidently, it is related to the word east, which naturally points us to the sunrise, to new days and new beginnings. It is also the direction where Jesus is expected to return from at His second coming (Matthew 24:27).

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