

Lent FAQ

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(1) Where does the word “Lent” come from?

The word itself comes from the Old English word for springtime.

(2) When was Lent first observed?

There were a number of observances in the early church that, over time, became combined to give us Lent as we know it today. In some places, there was a short fast before Easter. For example, in North Africa, the Friday and Saturday before Easter were fast days while in Alexandria (Egypt) and Syria, there was a 6 day fast (what came to be Holy Week). In other places, there was a period of preparation before baptism – but the day for baptisms varied. In Rome and North Africa, there was a three-week period of fasting before baptisms on Easter. In other places, where Baptism was not celebrated on Easter, this three-week period took place at other times of the year. In Alexandria, there was a 40-day period beginning on Epiphany that led to baptism; again, not on Easter. The first church document to mention Lent is from the Council of Nicaea (AD 325).

Over time, it became more and more common to celebrate baptism on Easter, and to extend the period of preparation and fasting to 40 days – connecting the fasting to the story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert. However, different places counted the 40 days of fasting differently. In Rome, which is the tradition that we’ve inherited, the way that the time before Easter has been counted, which days were considered days for fasting and which were not, and which days were considered Lent and which the Triduum, has varied a lot over time. But we can say that Lent in this sense (called “Quadragesima” or “the fortieth”) was part of the Roman calendar by the mid-4th century.

(3) How is the "start date" of Lent chosen, and why doesn't it start on the same day each year?

The start of Lent is based on when Easter Sunday falls, which changes year to year. For Roman Catholics and others using the Gregorian calendar (Christians in the West), Easter falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after March 21 (which is close to but not always the spring equinox). Thus, for us, Easter will always fall between March 22 and April 25. Then, we calculate backwards to find the date for Ash Wednesday. For those using the Julian calendar (Christians in the East), Easter will usually fall on a different date.

(4) Why do we receive ashes on Ash Wednesday?

The imposition of ashes on all the faithful (and not just those doing public penance) was a relatively late practice to develop, and Rome was especially slow to adopt it. The practice comes from the Roman text used in the Middle Ages as a processional antiphon on that day: “Let us change our garments for sackcloth and ashes”—the traditional marks of penitence (the source of

the text is unclear; it may be based on Jonah 3:6). Originally, in Rome, the reference to ashes was understood figuratively. But, as Roman liturgical books made their way into what today is France and Germany, Christians there took the verse quite literally! So, by 950 we see the imposition of ashes for everyone mentioned in the liturgical books of that area. In turn, those books eventually made their way back to Rome. The general imposition of ashes wasn't practiced in Italy until the 11th century; the name "Ash Wednesday" was first used in the 16th century.

(5) Why is Lent 40 days and why is Sunday not included?

We need to look at Lent and the Triduum together. How the Church has defined these seasons has varied greatly across the centuries. When the calendar was last revised, after Vatican II, the Easter Triduum was defined as extending from the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday through Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday. These Three Days are counted as three 24-hour periods, or as days in Jewish reckoning: from sundown to sundown. The Triduum is a unit, a single celebration of Christ's death and resurrection. It is not part of Lent, which extends from Ash Wednesday until the evening of Holy Thursday.

As the calendar was being revised, the question was asked: when should Lent start? Some argued that the season should begin on the First Sunday of Lent, the earlier tradition. Others, holding that Ash Wednesday was very popular among the faithful, wanted to start the season on that day, even though that was a later tradition. The second group won out, and, as a result, Lent is really 44 days long! Since we don't fast on Sundays, that gives us 38 days for the Lenten Fast.

Where does 40 come from? We add in the Paschal Fast: the two more days of fasting that we do from Holy Thursday evening to the Easter Vigil. So, once again, as in the early church, "Lent" and "Fast" are not synonymous. Between Lent and the Triduum, we have Forty Days of Fasting (not 40 Days of Lent); which we then follow with Fifty Days of Feasting!

We'll go deeper into what fasting means in the next installment of questions (see Q7).

(6) What is the meaning of Lent? How should people approach the Lenten season?

Most of us have inherited a sense that Lent is *only* about personal penance. That's understandable. As Christianity became the state religion in the Roman Empire and across Europe, adult baptisms gave way to infant baptisms. Also, over time, the idea of waiting for baptism was replaced by the practice of baptizing infants as soon as possible. As a result, the idea that Lent had – primarily – to do with preparing catechumens for baptism faded away. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of Vatican II called for a recovery of Lent as a baptismal season:

109. The season of Lent has a twofold character: primarily by recalling or preparing for baptism and by penance, it disposes the faithful, who more diligently hear the word of God and devote themselves to prayer, to celebrate the paschal mystery. This twofold character is to be brought into greater prominence both in the liturgy and by liturgical catechesis.

The reforms that followed the Council, especially the restored use of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), have helped us recover this sense that Lent has much more to do with our common journey to the font. The Church's *Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar* puts it this way:

27. Lent is ordered to preparing for the celebration of Easter, since the Lenten liturgy prepares for celebration of the Paschal Mystery both catechumens, by the various stages of Christian Initiation, and the faithful, who recall their own Baptism and do penance.

So, Lent is less about ourselves in isolation (and our personal sins) but about being a baptismal people, a people on a journey. We fast, we pray, we engage in the works of mercy—not just as an aid to our own conversion, as important as that is, but also in solidarity with the catechumens. We journey to the font together—they for the first time, and ourselves to renew our promises. So, we can say that we have recovered the earlier Church's rich theology of Lent.

(7) What are the rules about fasting and abstinence? Why are Catholics supposed to "give up" something for Lent? Is it okay to "cheat" on Sundays?

There are two aspects to “fasting” during Lent. First, there are the formal rules for fasting and abstinence on Ash Wednesday and the Fridays of Lent. This is the minimum that the Church asks of us:

- Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of **fast**. On days of fast, one full meal and two lesser meals are allowed. Eating between meals is not permitted. Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 are bound to fast.
- Ash Wednesday and all of the Fridays of Lent are also days of **abstinence**. On days of abstinence, meat may not be taken. The law of abstinence binds all Catholics fourteen years of age or older.
- If members of the Faithful are unable to observe the fast and abstinence regulations because of ill health or other reasons, they are urged to practice other forms of penance and self-denial suitable to their condition. Ignoring the laws of fast and abstinence is a serious matter.

But Lent also calls us to fasting more broadly. Traditionally, fasting has referred to the partial or total avoidance of food or drink, practiced for a variety of spiritual reasons. Fasting isn't about punishment, or deprivation (“giving something up”) simply for its own sake, or, worse, thinking we earn God's love or favor by doing so. Rather, it is a positive discipline that helps us grow in holiness; a response in love to being loved first by God. When we fast, we do so in solidarity with the hungry and with the Elect on their way to the Easter Sacraments. We also do so to become more aware that all that we have are gifts from God, and so foster a sense of gratitude and trust. In other words, Lent is about more than “giving up” – it's about “growing up” in the spiritual life, together (something that takes a lifetime).

In today's Roman Catholic Church, such fasting isn't as regulated or severe as it has been in the past. But that doesn't mean that we're excused from the practice. Instead, we are called—as adult Christians—to determine what sort of fasting we are being called to undertake. For example,

fasting from social media or other time online may be more helpful spiritually than fasting from food. More importantly, the Church asks that we not view fasting in isolation, but practice it together with other spiritual disciplines, such as frequent attendance at Eucharist, time spent in prayer and devotions, and works of charity. It's all about living and growing in the Christian life.

You're not "cheating" on Sundays. As the weekly Easter, a day of resurrection joy, Sundays are never fast days.

(8) Why can't we sing (or say) the Alleluia or Gloria at Mass during Lent?

Each season has its own "feel" to it – from the triumphant celebration of Easter to the expectant joy of Advent. Lent, too, has a particular "feel" to it. As a time of preparation, we're waiting for the full jubilation of Easter. As a time of penance, we're asked to keep a more subdued atmosphere. Thus, we don't decorate the church with flowers. Musically, we don't use instrumental music; instruments only accompany the human voice. And we refrain from singing both the Gloria, the joyous hymn of the angels, and the Alleluia, the Easter acclamation of the resurrection.

(9) What is the significance of the color purple (violet) during Lent?

The meanings that we attach to a color are culturally determined. For example, we typically see white as a celebratory color; in other places, it is the color of death and mourning. It is no surprise, then, that the use of different colors to signify the liturgical seasons has varied over time, from place to place, and among the churches. Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) was the first to regulate liturgical colors for the local church at Rome, using only white, red, black (including for Advent and Lent), and green. The Council of Trent added purple (replacing black for Advent and Lent) and rose (for the 4th Sunday of Lent and 3rd Sunday of Advent to mark the halfway point of those Seasons) to this list, giving us the basic scheme that we still use today.

Since the meaning of Lent is broader than penance, and Advent is no longer viewed as a penitential season, perhaps rethinking the meaning of the color today would be helpful. For example, purple has long been associated with royalty because of how rare the pigment was in the past. Thus, considering Advent as a time of preparing for the coming of the King, and Lent as a time preparing for Christ's crucifixion (in the Gospel of John, his being "lifted up" – the same word used for enthronement) and resurrection, the use of purple can be seen as especially appropriate. Some associate the "bluer" shades of purple with Advent - perhaps to reflect the Blessed Mother - and the "redder" shades with Lent – perhaps to reflect Christ's blood.