

## Thoughts for an *Extraordinary* Lent

**Name:** “Lent” is the English name of the 40-day fast (or period of penance) prior to Easter. The word “Lent” comes from the Anglo-Saxon “*Lencten*,” which means “spring.” It is understandable that this pre-Easter season of penance should receive such a name as this is the liturgical season during which we enter into the season of spring (based on the Vernal equinox). Additionally, the Lenten Ember Days,<sup>1</sup> which occur in the week after the First Sunday of Lent, are the Church’s preparation for the natural season of spring.

Inspired, no doubt, by Our Lord’s 40-day fast in the desert, the Latin term applied to the lengthy period of preparation before Easter is “*Quadragesima*,” which generally means 40th and in this case means “the 40th day.” *Quadragesima* (Lent) currently starts on Ash Wednesday, which is the 40th penitential day prior to the Easter. “*Quadragesima*” was derived from the Greek name for this season, “*Τεσσαρακοστή*” [tessarakoste] (40th), which is a word formed with reference to Pentecost (“*Πεντηκοστή*” [pentekoste], meaning 50th), which was a name of the Jewish season which lasted for 50 days starting on the day after the Sabbath after the Passover (see Leviticus 13:15-16).

**Themes:** There are several themes that run throughout the course of Lent:

- Preparation for Easter – From Christian antiquity, a period of time was set aside to spiritually prepare for the celebration of Easter. By means of the penitential exercises of this season, the faithful both make reparation for past sins and also grow in holiness so that they may more worthily celebrate the great feast of Easter.
- Spiritual Warfare – According to the liturgy on Ash Wednesday, this is a season of spiritual warfare. Therefore, the faithful should use the penitential exercises of this season to combat, in a more vigorous way than during the rest of the year, their ever-active enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil.
- Spiritual Tithe of the Year – The 40 days of penance during the season of Lent roughly correspond with 1/10th of the days of the year and thus constitute a type of spiritual tithe (a paying of 1/10th of some good). Material tithing was enjoined in the Old Testament upon God’s people.
- Public Penitents – As the ancient reconciliation of public penitents would occur during Holy Week, the time leading up to this reconciliation was for them a time of penance. Originally, only the public penitents received ashes. From this developed the practice of all the faithful receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday.
- Preparation for Baptism – New converts to the faith (the catechumens) were anciently Baptized and received into the Church during the Easter Vigil. For them, the time leading up to the Easter Vigil was a time of instruction and preparation, which included prayer and fasting.
- The history of the conspiracy that led to Christ’s Crucifixion will be presented during the liturgical readings of this season.
- The theme of exile continues from Septuagesima.

The last two weeks of Lent (known as Passiontide, which is composed of the two weeks of Passion Week and Holy Week) have their own proper themes and practices and will be treated of in their proper places.

**Length of Lent:** The Season of Lent has a total of 46 days, 40 of which are penitential days, as the six Sundays are non-penitential days.

### Why 40 Days of Penance?:

- Three great fasts in the Bible were 40 days long:
  - Christ fasted for 40 days in the desert after being Baptized
  - Moses fasted for 40 days before receiving the Law
  - Elias (Elijah) fasted for 40 days as he journeyed to Mount Horeb

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1. The Ember Days are four sets of three days (Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday) near the start of the natural seasons (winter, spring, summer, and fall) traditionally set aside by the Church as days of penance. This practice is to thank God for the blessings given in the past season and to ask His blessings for the upcoming one. Additionally, as the historical Roman practice was to have ordinations on the Ember Saturdays (which is still reflected in the Masses for the Ember Saturdays and the Ordination Rites), the Ember Days were also set aside to ask God’s blessing on those to be ordained.

- The number 40 denotes punishment and affliction:
  - In the time of Noah, God chastised the world with 40 days and 40 nights of rain
  - God kept the Hebrew people in the desert for 40 years because of their ingratitude
  - God commanded the Prophet Ezechiel to lie 40 days on his right side as a figure of the siege which was to bring destruction on Jerusalem

**Penitential Exercises:** All penitential exercises, including those of Lent, can be reduced to one of three types of penitential acts. The table below outlines each of these acts and their respective characteristics.

| This Penitential Act:                        | Combats this Root of Sin:  | Counteracts Sins Against: | Is Penitential with Respect to: | Is First Emphasized by the Liturgy on: |
|--|----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Prayer – any spiritual exercise              | Pride of life              | God                       | Goods of the spirit             | The Thursday after Ash<br>Wednesday    |
| Fasting* – any form of bodily mortification  | Concupiscence of the flesh | Self                      | Goods of the body               | Ash Wednesday                          |
| Almsdeeds – any act of mercy to our neighbor | Concupiscence of the eyes  | Neighbor                  | External possessions            | The Friday After Ash<br>Wednesday      |

\*The fasting enjoined by the Church on certain days has this stricter meaning: only one full meal and two smaller meals which together do not equal the full meal.

**Gloria?:** The *Gloria* is too joyful for this penitential season so it is absent from the Lenten Masses. It is, however, used on feast days, which are few. As a result, the *Gloria* is practically absent from this season.

**Alleluia?:** No, the absence of the *Alleluia*, which is a sign of our exile from our heavenly home, continues from Septuagesima.

**Liturgical Color:** The color of the season is violet. As this color denotes affliction and sadness, it is fitting for a penitential season. However, on the 4th Sunday of Lent, *Lætare* Sunday, the color rose may be worn to express the joy of reaching the liturgical halfway point of this penitential season and to encourage the faithful to persevere fervently to the end of this holy season in their Lenten exercises. The actual 20th day of penance is the Thursday before *Lætare* Sunday.

**Organ and Flowers?:** In order to create an atmosphere proper to the season, the Altar is not decorated with flowers. Additionally, the organ is not to be used unless it is necessary. However, on *Lætare* Sunday, for the reasons explained above, and on feasts, these restrictions are lifted.

**Proper Masses and Preface?:** Each day of Lent has a proper Mass assigned to it. These proper Masses have unique prayers, readings and chants. For most of Lent, the Lenten Preface is used. This Preface focuses on the fruits caused by God in us through the fasting (or works of penance) we have undertaken: the curbing of vices, the lifting up of the mind, and the bestowal of strength and rewards.

**Ash Wednesday:** The ashes blessed and distributed on Ash Wednesday are traditionally made by burning the palms blessed on the previous Palm Sunday. This blessing is done from the Epistle Corner and is one of the three traditional blessings done there (the other two are the candles at Candlemas and the palms on Palm Sunday). The admonition prayed by the Priest during the distribution – “Remember man, that thou art dust, and into dust thou shalt return” – reminds us of the creation of the First Man, Adam, from the slime of the earth and the punishment of death inflicted on him and his posterity by his sin. The reception of ashes is an invitation to humility and to reflect on the evil we have brought into the world by our own sins.

**Prayer Over the People:** Starting on Ash Wednesday, an additional prayer, the “Prayer Over the People,” is prayed after the Postcommunion during the Lenten Ferial (non-Sunday, non-feast-day) Masses. It is introduced by this exhortation to humility: “Bow down your heads to God.” Originally these prayers were said at the end of many Masses throughout the year, but now they are only prayed during Lent as a prayer for penitents. It is also the prayer at Vespers.