

### LENT! WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT???

Once again it is time for Lent! It is that season of the year which is probably more misunderstood than any other season or celebration in the Catholic Liturgical Year. The word lent comes from the Middle English word “lente” which means springtime. Lent actually starts some time before spring, but most often does end in the spring which this year is April 12 with the feast of the Resurrection. The origin of Lent most likely goes back almost to Apostolic times but did not become a universal practice until much later. Lent is the preparation for the celebration of Easter, the most important celebration in the Catholic Church, for it was the resurrection of Christ from the dead which gave positive proof that he was definitely God made man and that everything he said, taught and did was of divine origin and absolutely true. It was the resurrection which definitively put all the teachings of Christ together into one message, that God has redeemed mankind through his Son, Jesus Christ and that once again the gates of heaven were opened for all mankind.

Why forty days? The number forty in Scripture is somewhat a sacred number. The flood lasted forty days; the Jews were in the desert for forty years; Christ began his ministry by first going into the desert where he stayed and prayed for forty days. While the number forty is used, in all the contexts where it appears in Scripture it does not necessarily mean a literal number forty. Rather it means a special period of time which is to be considered somewhat sacred. When a person was sentenced to be whipped in Jewish Law, it was always forty lashes minus one so that it would not encroach on the sacred number forty. Thus Lent begins with the story of Christ going out into the desert where he remained praying for "forty days" and then being tempted by the devil when he was quite worn out and quite tired, a time when an ordinary person would certainly be tempted to follow the devils requests. But not Christ. He rose above all that and with each temptation he refused to follow it and instead turned it into a struggle between good and evil.

Springtime is a time for rejoicing as nature once again puts on its multi- colored mantel as all nature bursts forth with all the flowers and life of spring. The long winter is over; life is once again coming to the world. It is a time to celebrate. This is a universal feeling with people all over the globe. But for Christians and for Catholics in general, lent is a time to prepare for joy of the resurrection of Christ. It is a time to get one's act together, a time to reflect on where one stands, a time to act out one's faith, a time to review what they believe, and above all a time to reflect on just how they live and act as true followers of Jesus. In a word it is a time to grow closer to their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Thus the season of Lent over time evolved into a time of prayer and reflection and in many ways took on the mantel of a forty day retreat. It also took on the look of repentance for all the wrongs one might have done during the past year, a time to look closely at one's self and admit that just maybe they were really not quite saints just yet. To start this period, somewhere along the line an ancient symbol of repentance was resurrected. One reads in the Bible how some would show their sincerity of changing their ways by sitting at the gate of their town dressed in sack cloth and covered with ashes. It was a symbol of total degradation brought on by their sins and their actions but now showing in a dramatic way that they were about to change their way of acting and living. Over the years, over the millennia, this practice was reduced to a simple act of allowing the priest to put some ashes on one's forehead

as a symbol of all this would mean and of one's strong intention to make a change in their ways. It is truly amazing and actually very edifying to note how many come on this special Wednesday to receive ashes on their forehead. They really do want to make themselves better persons and they realize that they need God to be a part of their intentions.

Over the years other acts of penance have evolved. Fish was once considered quite a delicacy if one lived away from water and so abstinence from fish became a custom and then a law for believing Catholics to abstain from fish on Ash Wednesday and on all Fridays of Lent. Today this is as strong a recommendation as the Church can make for an act of penance, but it does not bind under sin (unless of course one deliberately eats meat on these days as a sign of their rebellion and refusal to follow Christ) This abstinence thus becomes a free act one makes to show their willingness to follow Christ and live up to their love of Christ. An act freely done for Christ is far better than simply following a law!

All the above is really giving up something rather than freely giving of one's self to the Lord as an act of repentance and contrition. Yet, this is still a giving up. Much better to be positive rather than negative in showing one's commitment to Christ and his Church. If possible it is far better for one to attend Mass and receive communion on a daily basis, but this is all too often impossible with trying to get the kids off to school as well as one's husband or these days, maybe one's wife! But there can also be family prayers, or if all the kids have flown the coop, for the two remaining to say a rosary together. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst!" Lent is a wonderful time for once again trying to pray together. It may seem awkward at first but once tried, one discovers the power and love of shared prayer. Try to be creative in using this Lent in a very positive way. The effects of such will last a lifetime.

And then finally, there is always the possibility of doing some reading to help one deepen their faith. Scripture always comes to mind as a first on a list, but perhaps that is not the ideal. Reading the Bible is not easy and the order in which one reads it is important. However, reading the new testament is something else again. If one chooses this then one must not just try to finish it from page one to the end but rather, pause every once in a while, or oftener, to just try and picture the scene and then reflect on what Christ has said or done, as well as to reflect on what all the bystanders are doing, or the Apostles. This form of reading is more contemplative and it can be most worthwhile in helping one to really come to know the Lord so much better. Let Him jump out of the pages so to speak and sit beside you! Just talk to him as you would to anyone else who would sit beside you. This talking is really prayer, prayer in its most fundamental meaning, conversation.

The first week of Lent is almost always the easiest for it is filled with good resolutions and a determination to make this the best Lent ever. But how fast this can all evaporate and suddenly one finds themselves living just like always. Human nature! It never changes. But don't let this become a disturbance and an excuse to give up. Rather, have a heart to heart talk with the Lord, opening up and letting him know how discouraged you are or whatever else. Pour it all out. Then discover just how understanding the Lord really is and how close he wants to be to you. Then go with the flow. Discover the real Lord Jesus!!!

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