

Your Best Lent Ever! – Part 2

Preparation

Lent is a shortened form of the Old English word *lencten*, which means "spring season." The word also implies "lengthen" as well as "forty." In the Northern Hemisphere, Lent occurs at a time when the days are lengthening and coincides with the spring season. Spring is a time of warming weather, seeds being planted, animals awakening, growth, and new life.

Lent has a long and diverse history. Originally, Lent began as a short period of fasting in preparation for Easter. The first indication of this is in the second century when St. Irenaeus wrote Pope St. Victor I about a fast that preceded Easter. This fast varied from a few days to a week and, by the end of the fourth century, to have been standardized into the present forty day period. The fast origin is why Lent is a penitential season.

In time, the season became connected with those joining the Catholic Church (Today's RCIA - Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults). St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote about giving instructions to catechumens during Lent. Though such instruction became connected with Lent, this practice became less necessary when Christianity was legalized (313 A.D.) and infant baptism became the norm. As the centuries progressed, Lent developed into a period of purification and preparation for Easter.

In 1956, Pope Pius XII advanced liturgical renewal, and Vatican II retrieved the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). In a more intense way, Lent again became not just a penitential season but also a season for the preparation and baptism of those becoming Catholic.

Lent, with its long and complex history, had preparation for Easter as its original focus. As time passed, Lent evolved to include those who would be baptized and those received into the church. This shift occurred in the fourth century but dissipated when fewer adults were baptized as infant baptism became the norm. Emphasis on adult baptism was restored in the 1950s and 60s. The focus of Lent today is on our baptism in Christ. We believers journey with those who are going to be baptized (the elect) and come to a greater understanding about the meaning of our own baptism.

The emphasis on modern-day Lent is communal rather than individual. The Hebrews experienced pilgrimage through the desert as a people – not as individuals. As the people of God, we journey with those preparing to be baptized (the elect) and to be joined to the Church (candidates). Lent is a forty day period (not counting Sundays) that begins on Ash Wednesday and continues until Holy Thursday. The number forty was finally arrived at in the fourth century because it is symbolic – Jesus fasted for 40 days in the desert, Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai with God receiving the Law, and the Hebrews wandered in the desert for 40 years.

One way of looking at Lent is as a retreat. Jesus himself retreated into the desert for that long period. During this sojourn he fasted, was tempted, and made life-defining choices. In the same way during the season of Lent, we believers retreat with the catechumens to wrestle with evil, scrutinize our hearts, and make life-giving choices. A retreat is a time of spiritual growth and illumination. Lent is all about purification and enlightenment. As with any retreat, many ups and downs, mood shifts, and awakenings occur during this sacred period.

Despite similarities, each Lent differs from any prior Lent we have experienced. With each subsequent Lent, we are in a new and unique point of our life cycle and, as such, require fresh insights into the areas where we require growth. We are at a different point in our walk with God. The experience of each Lent is cumulative. The sum of our lifetime of Lents taken together prepares us for our future meeting with God.

Our life now is a preparation for our own death and meeting with God. Lent serves to awaken us to this true meaning of life in an intense way.

Traditionally, Lent has been viewed as a penitential season. We express this when priests wear purple at liturgies. Penance means to be sorry for wrong deeds and to express our remorse through right actions. These actions should not just be individual and internal but also external and social (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy #110).

Lent is a time when we emphasize self-discipline and self-control. We must curb and gain control over our appetites and will. The best way to turn away from bad habits is to willfully adopt better habits. We also examine our lives regarding sin and turn away from wrong actions.

The three pillars of Lent are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We pray to come to know God. We seek illumination. We fast in obedience to gain self-control. We give alms to help others and to grow in generosity. During this long season, we hope to progress in our ongoing conversion. We desire to get closer to God and to experience intimacy. We want to gain self-control. The goal is to grow in virtues such as generosity, patience, and forgiveness. The only way to progress in virtue is to practice virtuous deeds.

Why Be Prepared?

Lent is a season of preparation. The Catechumens (who become the elect on the first Sunday of Lent) need time to prepare for baptism and that the Candidates (those being received into the church) need time to prepare, but what about us? What are we preparing for? Why do we need to prepare?

There are two seasons of preparation in the Catholic Church. We begin the liturgical year in December with Advent, which is the season that prepares us for the second coming of Christ at the end of time as well as for Christmas. Lent is the season that prepares us to celebrate Easter.

We are familiar with the notion of preparation. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by calling people to repentance. We prepare for confession by examining our conscience. We prepare by fasting an hour before communion. Our schooling and all our years of education are a preparation for obtaining a job and a career. Even the Boy Scouts know preparation is crucial. Thus, their motto: "Be prepared!"

Liturgically in Lent, the Church helps us prepare for Easter. One way is by removing some of the comforts we are accustomed to. For example, there are no alleluias sung or spoken during Lent. Likewise, the "Gloria" is not said or sung so that this song of praise will ring out with greater intensity on Easter. Some churches remove the water from the holy water fonts, although this practice isn't legislated by the Church. Crosses may be covered up from the fifth Sunday of Lent until Easter. No flowers may adorn the altar during Lent except on a special feast day.

Why these prescriptions? Through the absence of many comforts, the Church is getting us ready to appreciate Easter even more. It is key that you understand that Lent helps us to experience Easter more fully.

By removing these comforts, such as the alleluias, the "Gloria," and the visual attractions, we appreciate them so much more when Easter finally arrives. Don't you appreciate a meal even more right after a fast? You taste and savor the food. If you are a wine connoisseur, your taste buds become even more discerning if you haven't drunk wine in a long while. The effect of the alcohol is heightened also. Part of our preparation includes the removal of music and visuals so that, like the "Gloria," our spiritual experience will ring out with greater intensity when Easter dawns. At the Easter Vigil Mass, after the deprivation of Lent, bells suddenly ring, light floods the assembly, and the "Gloria" is sung. This can be a high moment of glory!

There is a saying quoted by many motivational speakers: "Success is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." Lent is a season of preparation. Easter is the opportunity for surprises and new life. Lent is also a season of opportunity given to us by God. The outcome isn't so much success as significance. Our life changes for the better. We experience growth and prepare for the glory of Easter.

Preparation Meets Opportunity

Why prepare? When we prepare well, we can experience Easter with greater appreciation and intensity. We can even have ecstatic moments of grace. You may realize the sheer gift of what it means to be baptized into Christ and the salvation that comes through Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. This emotional reaction is borne out of praying, reading, and the rigors of Lent.

For the newly baptized at the Easter Vigil Mass, suddenly you may recognize the significance of those being washed as people who are being saved from death and re-born to eternal life. They are committing their lives to Jesus Christ. Through the waters of baptism, their sins are washed away; they are forgiven. Lenten preparations led to this joyous Easter moment.

One day the whole world will know "Jesus Christ is Risen... Alleluia!" We need to be prepared. We want to be open and susceptible to grace when and where it occurs. Remember, Easter isn't just one day – it's a season of fifty days. Through preparation, we can encounter grace throughout the season of Easter and beyond. Our Lenten journey should be one where we have learned, progressed in virtue, and deepened our faith.

Easter Grace

Think of the possibilities! Lent in and of itself leads to growth and new life. It prepares us for something surprising and new. We can encounter Easter with grace that helps us face and recover from our various addictions. We become less afraid and discouraged. A new positive attitude pulses through our veins. Passion and fresh energy can be ours. New creativity wells up within. Easter is the celebration of the impossible becoming possible.

Why is Lent necessary? So that we will be prepared, ready, open, and susceptible to the grace of Easter. We aren't just preparing to celebrate one Easter day. We are preparing to receive a season of blessings and supernatural grace.

Having prepared well for the opportunity that comes brings success. The antithesis? If you are not prepared, the opportunity of experiencing Easter intensely will be missed. Preparation readies us spiritually. When God whispers or manifests his presence, we will be attuned and responsive. During the 50 day Easter season, the whole church hears resurrection accounts from the Gospels and readings from the Acts of the Apostles preparing us for the "continued preparation" (Pentecost) where ongoing formation can open us up to further moments of grace filled encounters.

The purpose of our existence now is a preparation for coming before God at the end of our life here on earth. We must come before God with a purified heart, an array of good deeds, and a legacy of faith and faithfulness. If we live being purified and accumulating such good works, we will be always ready.

The journey of Lent actually expands our heart so that we can receive more of God – his love and glory – not only now but also when we come before him at the end of our life. Our love, obedience, and faith actually opens us up to receive more and more from God. Those with hardened, disobedient hearts won't be able to receive any of God's goodness but, to the extent we are prepared and ready, we will receive more and more of God. The Easter season culminates in Pentecost. It is then when we hope to be filled to an ever-increasing capacity with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Preparation is important. Jesus teaches us about being awake and ready. His teachings beckon during Advent with the catchwords: "Be awake, be ready." In the Parable of the Talents, those who use what God gave them to be fruitful are commended, while the one who is passive and squanders his opportunities is shamed. The parables are meant as preparation, keeping in mind and warning us bluntly: "Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Matthew 24:44).

As with Advent, Lent is all about preparation. There is great meaning to Lent, this season of personal, interior, and exterior change. We grow and reach out to others as we become the best we can be. Most of all, we seek God and the enlightenment God's love brings. Purification and enlightenment are good in and of themselves; however, these virtues are also preparatory. We prepare to celebrate and experience abundant Easter life. We also prepare to receive more of God's Spirit at Pentecost. We also prepare for our own death and meeting with God beyond this life. The meaning of our whole life on earth is that we must be prepared to come before God at the end of our life. Lent prepares us for eternity.

Lenten Lessons:

- Lent is a preparation for Easter
- Lenten goals: purification and enlightenment
- Our life is a preparation for our final meeting with God
- Preparation expands our capacity to receive

Lenten Actions:

- Try to remember a significant Easter moment

