

# Lent ...

An Old English word for spring. The period of forty days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. A time of penance when people are asked to fast and prepare for the commemoration of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. In the Eastern Catholic rites, Lent is a fifty day period of penance known as the Great Fast.

The key to understanding the meaning of Lent is simple: Baptism. Preparation for Baptism and for renewing baptismal commitment lies at the heart of the season. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has re-emphasised the baptismal character of Lent, especially through the restoration of the Catechumenate and its Lenten rituals. Our challenge today is to renew our understanding of this important season of the Church year and to see how we can integrate our personal practices into this renewed perspective.

**Why is Baptism so important in our Lenten understanding?** Lent as a 40 day season developed in the fourth century from three merging sources. The first was the ancient paschal feast that began as a two day observance before Easter but was gradually lengthened to 40 days. The second was the catechumenate as a process of preparation for Baptism, including an intense period of preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation to be celebrated at Easter. The third was the Order of Penitents, which was modelled on the catechumenate and sought a second conversion for those who had fallen back into serious sin after baptism. As the catechumens entered their final period of preparation for baptism, the penitents and the rest of the community accompanied them on their journey and prepared to renew their baptismal vows at Easter. Lent, then, is radically baptismal.

## Ashes

Ashes are an ancient symbol of repentance (*sackcloth and ashes Jer 6:26, Is 58: 5, Dn 9: 3, Jdt4: 11, 1Mc3:47, Mt 11: 21*). They remind us of our mortality (*remember that you are dust*) and thus of the day when we will stand before God and be judged. This can be linked easily to the death and resurrection motif of baptism. To prepare well for the day we die, we must die now to sin and rise to new life in Christ. Being marked with ashes at the beginning of Lent indicates our recognition of the need for deeper conversion of our lives during this season of renewal.

Despite all the references in scripture, the use of ashes in the Church left only a few records in the first millennium of Church history. Thomas Talley, an expert on the history of the liturgical year, says that the first clearly datable liturgy for Ash Wednesday that provides for the sprinkling of ashes is in the Romano-Germanic pontifical of 960. Before that time, ashes had been used as a sign of admission to the Order of Penitents. As early as the sixth century, the Spanish Mozarabic rite calls for signing the forehead with ashes when admitting a gravely ill person to the Order of Penitents. At the beginning of the eleventh century, Abbot Aelfric notes that it was customary for all the faithful to take part in a ceremony on the Wednesday before Lent that included the imposition of ashes. Near the end of that century, Pope Urban II called for the general use of ashes on that day. Only later did this day come to be known as Ash Wednesday.

At first, clerics and men had ashes sprinkled on their heads while women had the sign of the cross made with ashes on their foreheads. Eventually it came to be the one ritual of the cross on the forehead. In the twelfth century the rule developed that the ashes were to be created by burning palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday.

## Giving Up .....?

For most older Catholics, the first thought that Lent can bring to mind is giving something up. The standard for children through recent generations was to give up sweets and chocolate. Some years ago a friend of mine told me she had urged her children to move beyond giving up sweets to giving up some kind of habit or trait that marked their lives. One of her children decided that for Lent he would no longer tease or fight with his brother. So far so good ... About halfway through Lent she asked her son how he was doing with his Lenten promise. The boy replied, *"I'm doing pretty good ... but I can't wait till Easter!"* This response indicates that this boy had only partly understood the purpose of Lenten "giving up." Lent is about conversion, turning our lives more completely over to Christ and his way of life. The goal is not to just abstain from the habit/trait/sin for the duration of Lent but to root it out of our lives forever. Conversion means leaving behind an old way of living and acting in order to embrace new life in Christ. For catechumens, Lent is a period intended to bring their initial conversion to completion.

## Prayer, fasting, alms giving

The three traditional pillars of Lenten observance. The key to renewed appropriation of these practices is to see their link to baptismal renewal.

**Prayer:** More time given to prayer during Lent should draw us closer to the Lord. We might pray especially for the grace to live out our baptismal promises more fully. We might pray for the elect who will be baptised at Easter and support their conversion journey by our prayer. We might pray for all those who will celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with us during Lent that they/we will be truly renewed in their/our baptismal commitment.

**Fasting:** Fasting is one of the most ancient practices linked to Lent. In fact, the paschal fast predates Lent as we know it. The early Church fasted intensely for two days before the celebration of the Easter Vigil. This fast was later extended and became a 40 day period of fasting leading up to Easter. Vatican II called us to renew the observance of the ancient paschal fast, "let the paschal fast be kept sacred. Let it be celebrated everywhere on Good Friday and, where possible, prolonged throughout Holy Saturday, so that the joys of the Sunday of the Resurrection may be attained with uplifted and clear mind" (Liturgy #110) The prophet Isaiah insists that fasting without changing our behaviour is not pleasing to God (Isaiah 58: 6 ~ 7). Fasting should be linked to our concern for those who are forced to fast by their poverty, those who suffer from the injustices of our economic and political structures, those who are in need for any reason. Thus fasting too, is linked to our living out our baptismal promises. By our baptism we are charged with the responsibility of showing Christ's love to the world, especially to those in need. Fasting can help us realise the suffering that so many people in our world experience every day, and it should lead us to greater efforts to alleviate that suffering.

**Almsgiving:** The third traditional pillar is linked to our baptismal commitment in the same way. It is a sign of our care for those in need and an expression of our gratitude for all that God has given us. Works of charity and the promotion of justice are integral elements of the Christian way of life we began when we were baptised.



**Suggestion:** Copy on to card and hand out to group

### A Prayer for Lent

Loving God,  
we thank you  
for sending  
Jesus to us.  
By his life, death  
and resurrection  
he redeemed the world.  
Help us to remember  
all you have done  
for us out of your  
unending love.

We pray today,  
not only for our  
own needs but for  
the needs of  
other people  
in our world.

During this  
holy season of Lent  
we ask your forgiveness  
for any wrong we have  
done to others.  
Help us to make up  
for any harm  
we have caused.  
Guide us in living  
in your love and mercy.  
Help us to always  
give praise to you  
by the way we live our lives.  
Amen.

### A Prayer for Lent

Loving God,  
we thank you  
for sending  
Jesus to us.  
By his life, death  
and resurrection  
he redeemed the world.  
Help us to remember  
all you have done  
for us out of your  
unending love.

We pray today,  
not only for our  
own needs but for  
the needs of  
other people  
in our world.

During this  
holy season of Lent  
we ask your forgiveness  
for any wrong we have  
done to others.  
Help us to make up  
for any harm  
we have caused.  
Guide us in living  
in your love and mercy.  
Help us to always  
give praise to you  
by the way we live our lives.  
Amen.

### A Prayer for Lent

Loving God,  
we thank you  
for sending  
Jesus to us.  
By his life, death  
and resurrection  
he redeemed the world.  
Help us to remember  
all you have done  
for us out of your  
unending love.

We pray today,  
not only for our  
own needs but for  
the needs of  
other people  
in our world.

During this  
holy season of Lent  
we ask your forgiveness  
for any wrong we have  
done to others.  
Help us to make up  
for any harm  
we have caused.  
Guide us in living  
in your love and mercy.  
Help us to always  
give praise to you  
by the way we live our lives.  
Amen.

## Lent: From Ash Wednesday to Good Friday

Each day of our lives is a time for growing in love of God and others. The days of Lent, however, are a special time of concentration for growing in God's love, for changing our hearts. Lent is a time for remembering that Jesus died on the cross for love of us. It is a time for...

- \* Dying to our selfishness
- \* Praying for our spiritual needs and the needs of others
- \* Asking forgiveness for any harm we may have caused



### An idea for your group...

On **Ash Wednesday** place a decorative bowl/dish in the centre of a table. Each time you gather during Lent, set aside a time for reflection and invite the young people to think of....

*how have I been kind (unselfish) toward others this week...*

*have I prayed for family, friends, others this week.....*

*have I asked for forgiveness when I have said or done something I shouldn't....*

**Invite** them to choose whichever card (see next page\*) suits and write their initials on it and place it in the bowl/dish.

By **Good Friday** (or as near to it as possible)

You will find that the bowl will have filled up with lots of cards representing acts of kindness and love, prayer and requests for forgiveness.

Wrap the pieces of paper in a paper towel, place in metal bucket (or on a BBQ) and pray...

Lord God, you created us from the dust of the earth.

You claimed us as your own in our baptism.

We ask for your care and power of love while we seek to follow you.

We ask your forgiveness for the times we have been selfish and failed to be loving.

We offer you these signs of our Lenten love. **AMEN**

Catechist/Leader strikes a match and lights the paper towel.

When all the fire is out and only ashes remain, bless one another on the forehead as was done so many weeks ago.

This time the ashes are a reminder of growing in God's love.

\*kindness/sorry (creative commons)

\*prayer (RETeam CDA)



*prayer*

*prayer*

*prayer*

*prayer*

**SORRY**

**SORRY**

**SORRY**

**SORRY**