

What is Lent?
By
Bishop Joseph Osei-Bonsu

Lent is the time set aside by the Church for the preparation towards Easter, and it runs from Ash Wednesday until the Mass of the Lord's Supper exclusive, ending with the beginning of the Easter triduum on Holy Thursday evening. Included in the actual season of Lent are Ash Wednesday, a universal day of fast, which begins the season, and six Sundays, known since 1969 only by their numerical designation except for the sixth Sunday of Lent, officially called Passion (Palm) Sunday.

Ash Wednesday

The beginning of the period of Lent is Ash Wednesday, so called from the ceremony of placing ashes on the forehead as a sign of penitence. Ash Wednesday occurs $6\frac{1}{2}$ weeks before Easter (between 4 February 4 and 10 March, depending on the date of Easter). In the early Christian church, the length of the Lenten celebration varied, but eventually it began 6 weeks (42 days) before Easter. This provided only 36 days of fast (excluding Sundays). In the 7th century, 4 days were added before the first Sunday in Lent in order to establish 40 fasting days, in imitation of Jesus Christ's fast in the desert.

It was the practice in Rome for penitents to begin their period of public penance on the first day of Lent. They were sprinkled with ashes, dressed in sackcloth, and obliged to remain apart until they were reconciled with the Christian community on Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter. When these practices fell into disuse (8th-10th century), the beginning of the penitential season of Lent was symbolized by placing ashes on the heads of the entire congregation.

The custom of distributing ashes on Ash Wednesday did not originate with Roman tradition but came from the Mozarabic (i.e., in the Iberian Peninsula, in what is now Spain and Portugal) and Gallican (French) liturgical traditions where it was connected with entrance into the order of penitents. Although not at first related to the season of Lent, the custom gained popularity, as many of the penitential practices once reserved for serious public sinners became standard for all the faithful. It was not until 1091, when Pope Urban II ordered the imposition of ashes on the heads of all the faithful, that the reception of ashes became mandatory, and the Wednesday preceding the First Sunday of Lent became known as Ash Wednesday. This reception of ashes by all the faithful was in keeping with the primary stress of Lent which was penance.

In the Roman Catholic Church, ashes obtained from burned palm branches of the previous Palm Sunday are blessed during Mass on Ash Wednesday. The priest marks the foreheads of the officiating priests, the clergy, and the congregation with these ashes, while reciting over each one the following

formula: “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel” or “Remember, man, you are dust, and to dust you will return”.

Lent and Penitential Abstinence

Forming an important part of the season of Lent is penitential abstinence. This means a temporary refraining from food partially or totally (fasting) or temporary refraining from certain types of food. Abstinence was a common practice among the Jews of Old Testament times. Fasting may be generally defined as refraining from eating and drinking out of a religious motive. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament fasting usually means total abstinence from food and drink for one day from morning until evening (see 2 Sam 1:12; Jonah 3:7; Acts 9:9). Fasting was part of the ritual for a holy war (1 Sam 14:34), a sign of mourning for the dead (2 Sam 3:35), and a reaction to calamity or distress (Joel 1:14). In times of calamity or distress the Israelites expressed a twofold religious attitude, viz., penance and supplication (see 1 Sam 7:6; Ezra 8:21-23).

The Jews observed the Day of Atonement as a strict fast for one day from sundown to sundown each year. Often in times of adversity, the judge, the king, or the prophet would proclaim a fast to show humility before God and to win God’s protection. The Jews marked the day of the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem and the day of the burning of the Temple by abstinence. There were certain festival days when leavened bread was forbidden. Abstinence from all “unclean foods” was of strict obligation at all times. The Pharisees of Jesus’ time fasted twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays. The purpose of the abstinence was both spiritual and penitential: to avoid unclean foods as an incentive for spiritual cleanness; to be humble before God as befits a sinful people; and to dispose God to look favourably upon them by protecting them from their enemies and granting them prosperity.

In the New Testament the most famous account of fasting is that of Jesus in the desert after his baptism. According to Matthew 4:2, Jesus “fasted for forty days and forty nights....” According to Luke 4:2 he “ate nothing during those (forty) days....” The fasting of Jesus became the model for early Christians. The only specific demand of abstinence imposed upon New Testament Christians was to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication” (Acts 15:29).

The early Christians tended to follow the practices of their Jewish heritage, but, as the links with Judaism became more tenuous, specifically Christian practices developed. In the earliest Christian centuries, Friday, the day of Jesus’ death, was observed as a day of abstinence. Giving up meat every Friday is an ancient practice which was meant to help a person remember the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus gave up everything for us on Good Friday, and Christians are to remember him every Friday by making a small sacrifice of our own. We abstain from meat on Friday to remember and, in a small way, to identify with the sacrifice of

Christ. Also very early, the Friday abstinence was prolonged into Saturday, in some places once a month, in other places every weekend, to commemorate the burial of Jesus and the mourning of the disciples. By the early Middle Ages abstinence was specified as abstinence from flesh meat. Although popes refused to abrogate the general law of Saturday abstinence, so many local indulgences (dispensations) were granted dispensing from the practice that in effect the law ceased to have any force.

The original Lenten abstinence was as brief as the two days before Easter, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. There were no uniform observances of Lent. The preparation of catechumens for baptism and of penitents for reconciliation, with the accompanying fasting, abstinence, and prayer, became the dominant factor in the development of Lent. In a spirit of solidarity, the faithful joined them to make Lent their own time of retreat and penance. In addition to Lent, days of abstinence were Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday of Ember Week,¹ marking each of the four seasons of the year; the four weeks of Advent, the vigils of major feasts, and the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension Thursday.

Although there were always local modifications, the laws of penitential abstinence remained quite severe until the issuance of the apostolic constitution *Poenitemini* (“On Fast and Abstinence”) by Paul VI (17 February 1966). A major thrust of the document was the reassertion of the truth of the constant need for repentance and penitential practices by divine law in the light of the gospel and the constant tradition of the Church, but, rather than imposing fasting and abstinence by law, now Christians were to have greater freedom in determining penitential practices deemed most beneficial for them. To preserve the common observance of penance, certain penitential days were to remain: all Fridays throughout the year and the time of Lent. Fridays are to be observed by abstinence from eating meat and Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as days of both abstinence and fasting.

What does it mean to fast during Lent? It does not mean that one should go without food for the whole day! In the Roman Catholic Church fasting is now understood as *one full meal with an allowance for some food in the morning and evening*. Who are obliged to fast during Lent? Fasting *binds those from the ages of twenty-one to fifty-nine*. Although fasting is obligatory on only Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, it remains a recommended penitential practice in general. The *Code of Canon Law* establishes that “those who have completed their fourteenth year of age” (i.e., those who have passed their fourteenth birthday) are obliged to abstain (CIC 1251), but the Code does not give an explanation of abstinence itself. This explanation is found instead in the 1966 apostolic constitution from Paul VI called *Paenitemini* referred to above: “The

¹ In the liturgical calendar of the Western Christian churches, ember days are four separate sets of three days within the same week – specifically, the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday – roughly equidistant in the circuit of the year, that are set aside for fasting and prayer.

law of abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, the products of milk or condiments made of animal fat [III:1]”.

Do the laws about fasting and abstinence apply to the Sundays in Lent? No. Indeed, the Sundays of the period of Lent are counted among the days of Lent, but we do not fast on those Sundays in Lent. This is because Sunday is the day of the Lord, the day on which Christ rose from the dead and we do not fast on such a day.

In the foregoing I have outlined the history of Lent. In what follows, I will indicate what one can do at the personal level during Lent.

The first thing to do is to take part in Mass on Ash Wednesday and receive the ashes. To the person to whom the laws of fasting and abstinence apply, I can say the following: you are required to fast and abstain from food and drink on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. You are to abstain from meat on all Fridays, unless a solemnity should fall on a Friday (Canon 1251). According to Canon 1253, “The Episcopal Conference can determine more particular ways in which fasting and abstinence are to be observed. In place of abstinence or fasting it can substitute, in whole or in part, other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety”. If you are a vegetarian, you may decide that abstaining from meat is no sacrifice for you and may decide to abstain from something else, or may substitute works of charity. During Lent also there are traditional practices like the Stations of the Cross on Fridays. You can take part in these.