

LENT: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

by Art Zannoni

Lent begins with an invitation from God: “Come back to me, with all your heart” (see Joel 2:12). Our Lenten journey is our response to God’s invitation.

The Word “Lent”

Interestingly, the word “lent” comes from Old English through Middle English to modern English. Looking at its origin, “lent” is a shortening of the word “lengthen,” used to describe the increasing amount of daylight each day: the harbinger of spring and new life, of sap running in trees, buds opening, green grass, daffodils, and tulips popping up.

Spring for many is a time of cleaning, and Lent is a time for spiritual spring cleaning. We clean out the clutter that has accumulated in our lives to make more room for God and one another.

Liturgical Math: Counting Forty Days

Mathematically speaking, there are 46 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. So how did we get forty? It was developed not by means of math but by theology. Every Sunday is Easter, even during the Lenten season, for every Sunday is a memorial of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When we subtract the six Sundays of Lent from the total we end up with forty.

Lent: A Brief History Lesson

Church historians tell us that by the end of the fourth century, a forty day period of fasting was observed in parts of the church in commemoration of Christ’s forty days in the desert. Later this developed into a penitential season in preparation for Easter. Lent had two emphases: it was the time of formation and preparation for the catechumens (those seeking entrance into the church) and it was a time of reconciliation for those members of the church whose sins had separated them from God and the church.

The shape and understanding of Lent changed with time. The public reconciliation of penitents died out, as did the catechumenate. Lent had shifted from a season of baptismal renewal to a liturgical season of fasting.

Ashes and Ash Wednesday

The origin and custom of using ashes is discovered in part in the Old Testament. They accompanied prayer in the case of Abraham when he said to God: “Let me take it upon myself to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.” The prophet Jeremiah uses ashes when he calls for repentance: “O daughter of my people, gird on sackcloth, roll in ashes” (Jer. 6:26). The prophet Daniel pleaded for God to rescue Israel with sackcloth and ashes as a sign of Israel’s repentance: “I turned to the Lord God, pleading in earnest prayer, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes” (Dan. 9:3). In the New Testament, Jesus refers to the use of sackcloth and ashes as signs of repentance: (see Mt. 11:21; Lk. 10:13).

In the early church, when the season of Lent was a time period for reconciliation of public sinners, the penitents would come to church at the start of Lent wearing a garment suggesting a sackcloth, an Old Testament symbol for seeking repentance. They were sprinkled with ashes and ritually dismissed from the assembly to do their penance for forty days, returning to

church on Holy Thursday. With time, the dismissing of penitents disappeared, but the ashes remained as a reminder and call to penance of all the faithful. The act of imposing ashes symbolizes human mortality and fragility and the need to be redeemed by the mercy of God.

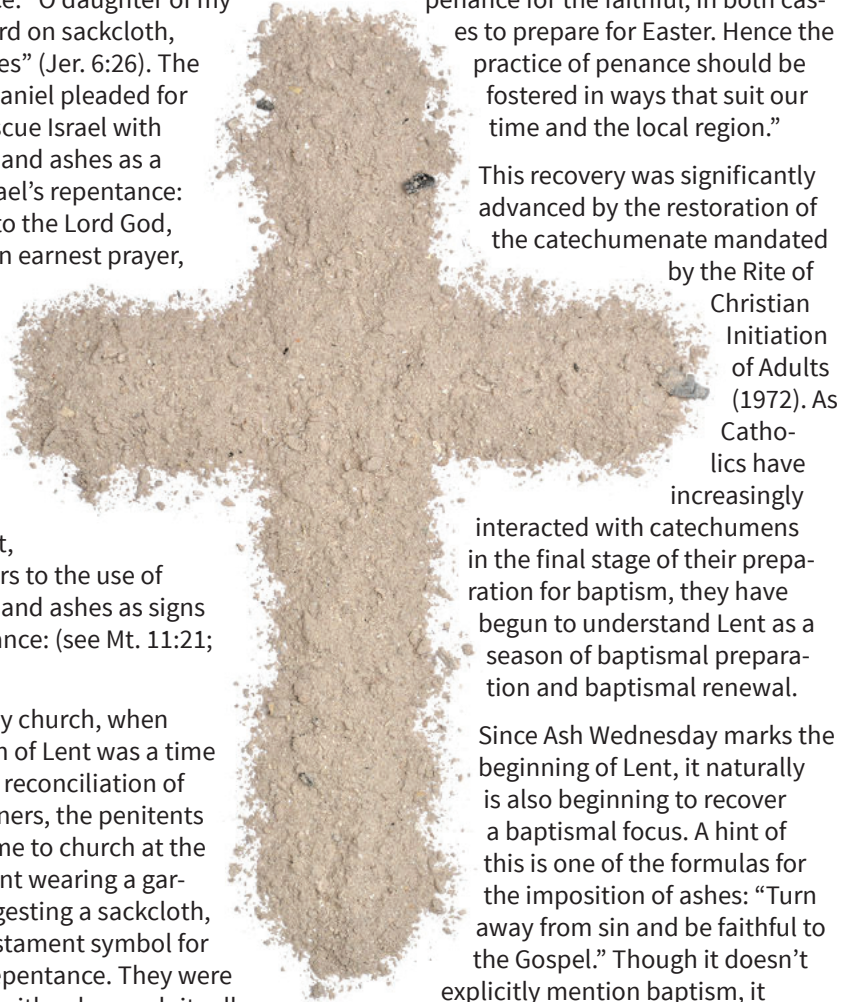
Ash Wednesday after Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) called for the renewal of Lent, recovering its ancient baptismal character. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states: “The season of Lent is both a time of preparation for baptism and a time of penance for the faithful, in both cases to prepare for Easter. Hence the practice of penance should be fostered in ways that suit our time and the local region.”

This recovery was significantly advanced by the restoration of the catechumenate mandated by the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (1972). As Catholics have increasingly

interacted with catechumens in the final stage of their preparation for baptism, they have begun to understand Lent as a season of baptismal preparation and baptismal renewal.

Since Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, it naturally is also beginning to recover a baptismal focus. A hint of this is one of the formulas for the imposition of ashes: “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.” Though it doesn’t explicitly mention baptism, it recalls the baptismal promises to reject sin and to profess our faith. It is a clear



call to conversion—that movement away from sin and toward Christ—that we have to embrace over and over again throughout our lives.

From Ashes to the Font

The message of Ash Wednesday is the call to continuous conversion. We move through Lent from ashes to the baptismal font. We dirty our faces on Ash Wednesday and are cleansed in the waters of the font at the Easter Vigil. More profoundly, we embrace the need to die to sin and selfishness at the beginning of Lent so that we can come to fuller life in the Risen One at Easter.

When we receive ashes on our foreheads, we remember who we are. We remember that we are creatures of the earth (“Remember that you are dust”). We remember that we are mortal beings (“and to dust you will return”). We remember that we are baptized. We remember that we are people on a journey of conversion (“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel”). We remember that we are members of the body of Christ (and the smudge on our foreheads will proclaim that identity to others, too).

Lenten Practices

Catholics are encouraged in Lent to cultivate three religious practices: fasting/abstinence, prayer, and almsgiving. The purpose of our Lenten practices is to discipline ourselves to be attuned to the activity of God in our lives.

What does it mean to fast?

Fasting is making do with less food. The result of not eating so much and getting hungry is that we have a heightened sense of awareness. When we eat too much we have a sluggish feeling. When we fast, we are more alert and open to the activities of God in our lives. Fasting cleanses our bodies and prepares us to

pray more deeply.

When do we fast?

Check with your local diocesan regulations regarding Lenten observances. In general, Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 are required to fast. This means that on these days we eat only one full meal, with no food between meals. It is understood that if one eats three meals a day the two other meals should not total one full meal. Of course, everyone is free to fast at any other time as an aid for prayer and reflection. Fasting—as opposed to dieting—enhances our hunger for God. Fasting is one of the most ancient practices in Lent.

What does it mean to abstain?

To abstain is to refrain from eating meat as an act of penance and sacrifice. Since innumerable people in the world cannot afford to eat meat, our abstaining can put us in solidarity with the hungry and poor of the world.

When do we abstain?

In general, Catholics in the United States and Canada abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and all the Fridays of Lent. This does not include abstaining from eggs and dairy products. Catholics ages fourteen and older are bound by the law of abstinence.

Prayer

Prayer is described as the raising of the mind and heart to God or conversing with God.

Lent is a time to make a conscious daily effort to pray more and with greater regularity. There are many ways to pray in Lent:

- prayer daily either individually or with your family
- celebrate the Sunday Eucharist and if possible the daily Eucharist
- make a retreat



- make a pilgrimage to a holy place
- commit to spiritual reading

Almsgiving

The giving of alms can be traced back to Jesus. In the story of the poor widow (Luke 21:1-4) Jesus notes that people were giving alms and uses the tradition to teach us about generosity. He says that it is the widow who gives the better share because she gives out of her daily living expenses, out of her poverty, while the rich give simply from their surplus. This Gospel passage reminds us that regardless of our finances, for Catholic Christians, the sharing of our various blessings is not optional.

Almsgiving is much more than giving money to the poor or to your favorite charity. It is all the things we can do to make the broken world whole again. The aim of giving alms is to right the wrong distribution caused by greed, power, or anything else. The three modes of giving alms are: time, talent, and treasure.

In our fast-paced world, **time** may be the form of alms that is hardest to give. But giving of our time is a healthy Lenten practice whether it is a parent or grandparent giving that time to a child generously and regularly, or a person volunteering time at a food bank or a women's shelter, or a person taking time to tutor adults in a literacy program.

Everyone has been blessed by God with talents. We can practice the **talent** alms by cooking a meal for a terminally ill person, elderly shut-in, widow, or widower. We could help fix up a person's home or do some spring cleaning for them. Lent is a time to inventory the talents we have and to make use of them.

Finally, Lent is a time to reflect on how we share our **treasures**, both the things we own and the money we earn. Could we live on less? What donations could we make to charity this Lent? Could we forgive someone a monetary debt they owe us?

As you begin your Lenten journey this year, consider how God may be inviting you to stretch yourself to live out the season more fully.

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