

Question: How Have Christians Prepared for Easter?

Focus: History of Lent

A. Earliest Observance (1st and 2nd c.)

Fasting before the celebration of Jesus' resurrection is an ancient observance, probably inherited from **Judaism** and its preparation for Passover. Lent properly speaking, derives from the special discipline of the **Catechumens** during the final stage of their **preparation for Baptism** at Easter. Pre-Baptismal fasts of catechumens are mentioned by Justin, 155 A.D. as **traditional**. Regular organization of this stage, where catechumens attended special classes on Christian doctrine called **catechesis** (catechism), date from the latter half of the second century, although they probably existed earlier.

B. Catechumenate (4th c.)

In the **fourth century**, through the influence of the ascetic-monastic movement, it became customary for the **faithful at large** to join the catechumens in their pre-Baptismal fast, and clergy also encouraged them to attend the instructions on Christian doctrine as a **refresher course**. The extension for the whole observance to a period of **six weeks** took place in the fourth century.

C. Forty Days – Calculating the Length of the Fast

Various methods of calculating the **length** of the fast were found in the **fourth** century. At **Jerusalem** in 348 A.D., “forty days” are spread over eight weeks; neither Saturday nor Sunday was fasted. By 339 A.D., the influential **Alexandrian** Church in Egypt was urgently exhorted to observe the full Lent of forty days by their bishop Athanasius. In Rome, we can say with certitude that it was not until the late **seventh century** that the full total of forty days of actual fasting (Sundays not included) began to be observed with the addition of **Ash Wednesday** and the three following days.

D. Imposition of Ashes

The moving ceremony of the **imposition of ashes** on the brows of the congregation beginning their Lenten fast, accompanied by the words “remember, you were once dust (clay) and unto dust (clay) you shall return”, from which Ash Wednesday gets its name, is not a Roman ceremony, but seems to have originated in Gaul, i.e., **France**, in the sixth century, and was at first confined to **public penitents** for grave and notorious sin. It then spread to England, then to Rome, then to Germany, southern Italy and Spain in the **ninth and tenth century**.

E. Pastoral Need

So Lent in the form we know **did not** originate as a historical commemoration of Jesus' fast in the wilderness or even as a preparation for Holy Week and Easter, but as a private initiative of devout **laity** in taking it upon ourselves, (i.e., **pastoral need**), to share the solemn preparation of the catechumens for Baptism. It was normally conferred at the **Easter vigil**, which made a Lent preparation for Easter. It was officially adopted as a season of special penitence and prayer, not as especially related to Jesus' suffering, but because it was a practical answer to a **new need**, which was becoming increasingly pressing about 320-350 A.D.

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F. Pressing Problem

Fasts and ascetic exercises in the third century had been largely a matter of voluntary choice and private devotion. The pressure of a hostile world helped keep the standard of Christian self-discipline high. With the relaxation of this pressure in the fourth century (Constantine), there was a greatly increased danger of lowered standards. In spite of the care taken about the instruction of the Catechumens for Baptism, the great mass of conventional converts now flooding into the church was apt to remain not more than lukewarm. Fundamental Christian doctrine and ethics were driven home at the catechumen classes but a fast of forty days imposed on all alike, even the lax and worldly, presented the whole church with an opportunity to live, at least for a season, as a body of Christ, in fervent and frequent prayer, in order that at their Easter communion, all might be found truly members of that body.

G. Meaning for Us

The fast, therefore, was not a mere mechanical discipline, although it was severe. The old Lenten sermons insist on mutual forgiveness, patience, on the intensification of private prayer and generosity in almsgiving, and on regular attendance at biblical and doctrinal instruction, just as strictly as they require of the Christian as fasting. When the whole world was becoming Christian in name only, there was a great wholesomeness about this annual requirement of a season of self-discipline, which covered every aspect of social life. It reminded the careless and even the sinful, as it did the devout, of the demand of the Christian life: “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12, 2).

Recent media reports indicate massive fraud in business, law and accounting, plagiarism and fabrication in journalism, steroids in sports, fakery in science, deception in advertising. Often our favorite songs are lip-synched, out of fear of making a mistake. Even religion can be watered down into a comfort zone of platitudes. Worst of all we are taught that peace and happiness are outside us, can be bought through increased consumerism, noise, unhealthy food, or mindless T.V.

The Kingdom of God, however, is within and overflows into a peace which is justice. Perhaps our fasting might include abstinence from useless food, violent T.V. programming, abrasive talk. We might look at food labels more closely; we might find out who actually owns the radio and T.V. stations we watch and be more critical of what is said and what is left out; we might ask who makes our clothes and whether child labor laws are violated.

Finally, are we centered enough in our prayer and meditation to trust in a kingdom, which will never unfold unless we ourselves become authentic that is, authors (co-creators) of a life “where peace and justice kiss”?

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2/20/05