

20 ANSWERS LENT eBOOK



SPECIAL E D I T I O N



1. What is Lent?

Apologist Jimmy Akin notes that “Lent is the Old English word for spring. In almost all other languages, Lent’s name is a derivative of the Latin term quadragesima or ‘the forty days.’”

The Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy says that

Lent precedes and prepares for Easter. It is a time to hear the word of God, to convert, to prepare for and remember baptism, to be reconciled with God and one’s neighbor, and of more frequent recourse to the “arms of Christian penance”: prayer, fasting and good works. . . .

Popular piety does not easily perceive the mystical aspect of Lent and does not emphasize any of its great themes or values, such a relationship between “the sacrament of forty days” and “the sacraments of Christian initiation,” nor the mystery of the “exodus” which is always present in the Lenten journey. Popular piety concentrates on the mysteries of Christ’s humanity, and during Lent the faithful pay close attention to the passion and death of our Lord (124).

Lent doesn’t last precisely forty days but approximates that number as a symbol of biblical journeying—Noah’s flood, the Israelites wandering in the desert, Christ living in the desert. This time is meant to prepare us for the joy and celebration of Christ’s resurrection on Easter. Indeed, it’s meant to allow us to enter into his suffering, passion, and death so that we may enter into his resurrection.

As with Advent, Catholics traditionally prepare with acts of penance (including abstinence from meat on Fridays) and charity, and through celebration of the sacraments. Once again, the churches are decked out in violet and rose over the six Sundays of Lent, symbolizing both penance and anticipation. But although churches often decorate with seasonal flowers and wreaths during Advent, flowers aren’t present in the sanctuary during Lent, symbolizing the desert experience.

The desert image of Lent is an apt one, since by simplicity and self-denial we make ourselves more receptive to grace. (Though sometimes this image of Lent can be misunderstood, leading parishes to strip their churches not only of flowers, but also of important sacramentals such as holy water.) It can be helpful, then, to reflect more deeply on what deserts are. Deserts are regions of extreme dryness, but that does not mean that the plant life there is dead. Many of the flowers and plants in deserts are known for storing

water or for having deep roots that tap into underground water supplies. Water loss is prevented through thick waxy coats on the leaves.

In the Christian spiritual life, water is a symbol for grace. It is the matter for baptism, which washes us clean of original sin. The spiritual masters, such as St. Teresa of Avila, often use water as a metaphor for the action of grace in the soul. Far from doing without grace during Lent, then, we are supposed to soak it up—through prayer, abstinence, sacrifices, sacramentals, the sacraments (especially confession)—to store it in abundance.

But we do not soak up grace to hoard it, for it is meant not just for us but also for the world. And so, like the salt that preserves and seasons, we focus during Lent on preserving Christian truth and passing it on to future generations.

Sometimes, we become discouraged during Lent when we fail to keep our Lenten resolutions (especially those that involve giving up comfort food or online socializing). We find we weren't able to meet all the high hopes we had on Shrove Tuesday. We stumble and fall short of the finish line in our spiritual marathon. But this doesn't mean that we're a failure as a Catholic or that we should give up. Holiness is a habit that comes only through diligent practice, and so our expectation should not be a perfect Lent every year, but a Lent that's at least a little more fruitful than the last.

2. How is Easter Sunday determined? Palm Sunday? Ash Wednesday?

Jesus rose from the dead on the first Sunday following the feast of Passover. (Technically, he may have risen Saturday night, but that still counts as Sunday on the Jewish reckoning, which begins each day at sunset instead of at midnight.)

The date of Passover is a complicated thing. Theoretically, the date should be the 14th of the Jewish month of Nisan, and it should correspond to a full moon (the Jewish calendar being partly lunar). In practice, it didn't always work out that way. The month-moon cycles got out of synch, and sometimes feasts would be held on a "liturgical" full moon even when it was not an astronomical full moon. As a result, rabbis periodically had to announce when Passover would be celebrated.

Christians didn't like being dependent on the pronouncements of rabbis for how to celebrate Christian feasts, so they came up with another way of determining the date. They decided that Easter would be celebrated on the first Sunday after (never on) the Paschal full moon.

Theoretically, the Paschal full moon is the first full moon occurring on or after the spring equinox. However, this day can be reckoned in different ways. One way is by looking at the sky, which yields the astronomical spring equinox. But since this shifts from year to year, most people follow the calendrical spring equinox, which is reckoned as March 21.

On the Gregorian calendar (the one that we use), Easter is the first Sunday after the Paschal full moon, which is the first full moon on or after March 21. Easter thus always falls between March 22 and April 25.

Now, to find Palm Sunday (the sixth Sunday of Lent) you start with the date of Easter and back up one week: It is the Sunday before Easter Sunday.

To find Ash Wednesday, you start with the date of Easter Sunday, back up six weeks (that gives you the first Sunday of Lent), and then back up four more days: Ash Wednesday is the Wednesday before the first Sunday of Lent.

3. Why do Catholics practice fasting and abstinence during Lent?

Explain that Lent is the 40 days before Easter in which Catholics pray, fast, contemplate, and engage in acts of spiritual self-discipline. Catholics do these things because Easter, which celebrates the Resurrection of Christ, is the greatest holy day of the Christian year (even above Christmas) and Catholics have recognized that it is appropriate to prepare for such a holy day by engaging in such disciplines.

(Archbishop Fulton Sheen noted that the Protestant attitude is summarized by the line, “First comes the feast, then comes the hangover,” while the Catholic attitude is “First comes the fast, then comes the feast.”)

The reason Lent lasts 40 days is that 40 is the traditional number of judgment and spiritual testing in the Bible (Gn 7:4, Ex 24:18, 34:28, Nm 13:25, 14:33, Jon 3:4). Lent bears particular relationship to the 40 days Christ spent fasting in the desert before entering into his public ministry (Mt 4:1-11). Catholics imitate Christ by spending 40 days in spiritual discipline before the celebration of Christ’s triumph over sin and death.

Fasting is a biblical discipline that can be defended from both the Old and the New Testament. Christ expected his disciples to fast (Mt 9:14-15) and issued instructions for how they should do so (Mt 6:16-18). Catholics follow this pattern by holding a partial fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Abstinence from certain foods is also a biblical discipline. In Daniel 10:2-3 we read, “In those days I, Daniel, was mourning for three weeks. I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, for the full three weeks.” Catholics use a practice similar to Daniel’s when, as a way of commemorating Christ’s Crucifixion on a Friday, they abstain from eating meat on that day of the week during Lent. The only kind of flesh they eat on Friday is fish, which is a symbol of Christ.

Even the Ash Wednesday practice of having one’s forehead signed with ashes has a biblical parallel. Putting ashes on one’s head was a common biblical expression of mourning (1 Sm 13:19, Est 4:1, Is 61:3; see also Est 4:3, Jer 6:26, Ez 27:30, Dn 9:3, Mt 11:21, Lk 10:13). By having the sign of the cross made with ashes on their foreheads, Catholics mourn Christ’s suffering on the cross and their own sins, which made that suffering necessary.

4. Is it appropriate to empty the holy water fonts during Lent?

Emptying or covering holy water fonts during Lent is a modern innovation not found in the Church’s directives. Water is always kept in the holy water fonts until after Mass on Holy Thursday, when they are emptied of holy water and later refilled with the water blessed at the Easter Vigil (Paschales Solemnitatis 97).

Lent is a time when we need the spiritual benefits of holy water. Holy water is a protection from evil, a reminder of our baptism and of our commitment to live a Christ-centered life. Empty holy water fonts during Lent only deprive the faithful of spiritual benefits that are theirs by right.

The General Instruction on the Roman Missal requires a crucifix to be present during the celebration of the Mass. It may be possible to get away with replacing the main sanctuary crucifix with a cross if there is another crucifix present at least during the Mass (e.g., if an altar server or crucifer bears a crucifix into the sanctuary during the entrance). The covering of crosses is permitted during the last two weeks of Lent (approved by USCCB and Holy See, effective April 2002). The rubrics for the fifth Sunday of Lent state:

In the dioceses of the United States of America, crosses in the church may be covered from the conclusion of the Mass for Saturday of the fourth week of Lent until the end of the celebration of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday. Images in the church may be covered from the conclusion of the Mass for Saturday of the Fourth Week of Lent until the beginning of the Easter Vigil.

5. How should senior citizens observe fasting and abstinence during Lent?

According to canon 1252 of the Code of Canon Law, all Latin-rite Catholics are required observe the laws of abstinence starting at the age of 14. There is no upper age limit on abstinence after which the person is automatically excused, but those who need to eat meat for a medical reason may be dispensed from the abstinence requirement. In the United States, the fasting requirement begins at age 18 and continues until age 59. At that age, a person is automatically excused from the requirement to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, but, if health permits, may participate in the fast should he choose to do so.

6. Is Lenten penance something voluntarily sought, or does it mean just accepting difficulties passively?

The traditional practices of Lent—fasting, prayer, reception of the sacraments, and almsgiving—are still encouraged by the Church. Fasting is even mandated on certain days. Far from being “negative,” these are a means of escaping our self-preoccupation and entering into the mind of Christ. Through eating less, we feel some of the hunger he feels for souls, and we grasp our dependence on him for our very existence. Through prayer, we join in that perfect union of the Trinity. Through the sacraments, especially Eucharist and penance, we are drawn more closely into that union, and we obtain grace to overcome sin. Through giving away material goods, we empty ourselves in a small way as Jesus emptied himself totally on the cross; we are sharply reminded of how attached we are to trifles. All of these things make clear to us how desperately we need God’s redeeming grace.

The practice of denying ourselves some legitimate pleasure is also healthy in a culture of wanton self-gratification. It subtly catechizes us about our own weakness and the power of surrender to God.

As for penance being merely passive acceptance of trials, it is not. Certainly, we may unite all our sufferings, large and small, with those of Jesus, and there is great merit in that. Everyone suffers in this life, and “offering it up” is a fruitful use of that pain. That is not the same as assuming extra trials to make reparation for one’s own sins or those of others. One should never undertake severe penances without the permission of one’s confessor, of course.

7. Why is the A cycle Lectionary used in Lent?

Historically the stories from the Gospel of John (the woman at the well, the man born blind, Lazarus) have been a part of adult preparation for baptism. The Gospel of

Matthew's account of the Temptations of Christ and the Transfiguration were also traditionally used for this preparation. Over the centuries Lent became used as the official time of preparation for adults who want to be baptized (i.e. the Scrutinies).

The themes of these Gospel readings (overcoming temptation, revelation of Christ, encountering Christ, gradual understanding of Christ, and receiving new life) are perfect for preparing for baptism and Easter.

If a parish has a Catechumenate that is undergoing the Scrutinies then Cycle A makes the most sense to be used during the Lenten Sundays no matter what the Yearly Cycle happens to be at that time. However, in years that are not already Cycle A, Cycles B and C may be used in their respective years if the parish does not anyone for baptism that year.

8. Does abstinence from meat include byproducts of animals, such as eggs, cheese, and milk?

At one time Lenten abstinence from meat was much stricter than it is today. In the past, Catholics did fast from meat byproducts as well as from meat. That is why there arose in some areas in the West the tradition of Fat Tuesday, the day that preceded the opening of Lent on Ash Wednesday. Catholics would clean out their pantries of meat byproducts by using them in special meals on that Tuesday before Lent. Even today in England, there is a tradition of pancake races on Fat Tuesday in honor of the one-time custom of making pancakes on this day to use up milk, eggs, and butter.

Such Lenten abstinence from meat byproducts is no longer required for Latin-rite Catholics, although it is still mandatory in Eastern churches that are in union with Rome.

9. Is it appropriate to light candles in front of the saint statues while they are covered during Lent?

Although there aren't any formal Church prohibitions against such a practice, there could be a very practical one—namely, preventing the start of a fire.

Lighting candles before sacred images that the faithful use as a means to focus their prayer on the saint whom they are petitioning is indeed a long and venerable practice in the Church. Meanwhile, the Holy See has allowed for the traditional covering of sacred images during Lent:

In the diocese of the United States, the practice of covering crosses and images throughout the church from this Sunday may be observed. Crosses remain covered until the end of the celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday, but images remain covered until the beginning of the Easter Vigil (Roman Missal, introduction to the Fifth Sunday of Lent).

There is no formal prohibition against lighting candles before covered images in the Church's General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)—see GIRM 318 regarding sacred images. The Church's Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy also contains no such prohibition.

However, given the typical proximity of church statutes to accompanying votive candles, as well as the typical flammability of the Lenten coverings on such images, lighting votive candles in front of them could pose a fire hazard. Stone or plaster statues aren't flammable, but the material used for covering them during Lent typically is.

Consequently, unless the material of the coverings is clearly fire retardant, it's best not to cover such images during Lent when the images have accompanying votive candles. Better to forego the coverings than to remove the votive candles. And if coverings are used, then pastors should make sure the votive candles are removed, unless the candles are a safe distance from the statues. Consulting the local fire department would be prudent in such cases.

10. What are scrutinies?

The scrutinies are a series of rites for adults who wish to be baptized. They are celebrated in the third, fourth, and fifth weeks of the Lenten season.

This is considered a period of purification and enlightenment for the elect. There are prayers of exorcism which are intended to help purify the elect from sin and sinful desires. The overall prayers and laying on of hands are to help the elect be enlightened by the Word and grace of God.

The basic structure which takes place immediately following the homily:

- The elect (with sponsors) are invited forward
- Invitation for parish to silently pray for the elect
- Intercessions for the elect
- Prayer of exorcism
- Laying on of hands on the elect

- Prayer over the elect
- Dismissal of the elect

11. When does Lent really end?

Lent ends when the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday begins, because the Mass of the Lord's Supper ushers in the Holy Triduum, a liturgical season in its own right and the shortest of the liturgical year. As for the Lenten penances, those are voluntary practices that people take up as personal devotions in addition to the penances required by the Church on the Fridays of Lent. As voluntary penances can be voluntarily set aside, taking a break from them on Sundays in honor of the Lord's Day is perfectly fine. That said, the Sundays of Lent are indeed part of the Lenten season.

12. Why is the Tuesday before Lent called Shrove Tuesday, and why is Holy Thursday also called Maundy Thursday?

"Shrove" comes from the word shrive and refers to the absolution of a penitent's sins. The Tuesday before Ash Wednesday is sometimes called "Shrove Tuesday" because of a Catholic custom of going to confession on that day in preparation for Lent.

"Maundy" comes from the word mandatum, which means "commandment" and refers to Christ's mandate at the Last Supper on Holy Thursday to "Love one another, even as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34).

13. May the Blessed Sacrament be exposed on Good Friday?

No. Solemn exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, which entails exposition of the Holy Eucharist, may not take place after midnight on Holy Thursday. Following the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, there is a Eucharistic procession to the place of repose, such as the parish hall. The Roman Missal provides that "the faithful are invited to continue adoration before the Blessed Sacrament for a suitable length of time during the night, according to local circumstances, but after midnight the adoration should take place without solemnity" (The Roman Missal, "Thursday of the Lord's Supper," no. 43, emphasis added).

This means that the Blessed Sacrament is then reposed in a safe place outside of the parish church, typically the parish rectory (where the parish priest resides).

Because our attention is focused first on Our Lord's passion and death on Good Friday, no solemn adoration takes place that day, nor on Holy Saturday until after the Easter

Vigil. Some parishes choose to resume perpetual adoration on Easter morning, instead of right after the Easter Vigil, but there is no specific Church legislation on that matter.

14. Is it permissible to have nocturnal adoration from the night of Holy Thursday into the morning of Good Friday?

After the Mass of the Lord's Supper [on Holy Thursday], the faithful should be encouraged to spend a suitable period of time during the night in the church in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament that has been solemnly reserved.

From midnight onward, however, the adoration should be made without external solemnity, for the day of the Lord's Passion has begun (Paschale Solemnitatis 56).

While prolonged eucharistic adoration of the reserved—not exposed—Blessed Sacrament into the early morning hours of Good Friday is permitted, after midnight it should be silent adoration. When the adoration should end is not clearly defined by the document, but the wording of the rubric appears to indicate that the adoration should take place during nighttime hours.

15. Why did the criminal at Jesus's crucifixion not go to Purgatory and was with Jesus that day in Heaven?

It is impossible to know whether or not the “good thief” went “straight to heaven” or had to undergo Purgatory. We cannot really judge that. It could be that he died in a state of perfect contrition for his sins and received baptism of desire.

A larger issue is that the Greek manuscripts that contain this passage do not contain punctuation. So did Jesus say to him: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” OR “Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise.” Punctuation makes a big difference.

Another issue is whether in this case “paradise” means heaven. It could also refer to the abode of the dead for the righteous, the bosom of Abraham. In which case the gates of heaven would not have been opened yet until the resurrection, so they would have been together in the abode of the righteous and the good thief still could have undergone some purgation before receiving the Beatific Vision. While this is a highly contested theory of the use of “paradise” it is still debated.

And, most importantly, since the cleansing of Purgatory takes place outside of space and time as we currently know them then the concept of today, tomorrow, or whenever in relation to Purgatory is not a one-to-one analogy.

Generally speaking the most common understanding of the passage has been that the good thief went “straight to heaven” due to his perfect contrition for his sins, but some other theories are also acceptable to the faith.

16. I don't understand stigmata. Why would Jesus want anyone to suffer his crucifixion wounds?

It was St. Paul, in the letter to the Galatians in the New Testament, who said, “Let no man trouble me, for I bear the marks of the Lord Jesus in my body” (Gal. 6:17). So it has been that down through the centuries a number of Christians have received the grace of having the stigmata, or marks of Jesus’ wounds, on their bodies; many of them were great saints, such as Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, and, of course, Padre Pio.

This is not meant as cruel or as torture but is rather a grace of being deeply united to Christ in his sufferings for the sake of sinners. After all, all Christians must share in Christ’s sufferings, each one in his or her own way. Jesus tells us in the Gospel that everyone who would be his disciple must take up the cross and follow him. He even shared the cross with St. Simon of Cyrene, who carried it for a while for Jesus on the way to Calvary.

Luke’s Gospel tells us of how Mary’s soul was to be pierced with a sword of sorrow at her Son’s death. St. Paul, in the first chapter of the letter to the Colossians, tells us that he is making up for what is lacking, what remains, in the suffering of Christ for the sake of Christ’s body, which is the Church. So the stigmata should be understood in the light of the universal standard of being a follower of the crucified Savior, that we each carry our cross with him.

17. Why did Jesus ask in Matthew 26:39, if it is possible let this cup pass from me

As a man, Jesus is like us in all things but sin (Heb. 4:15). And so he experienced the tremendous fear and anguish of his Passion that began in the Garden of Gethsemane (CCC 612-17). This incomparable trial encompassed both the physical suffering of his Passion as well as the spiritual ordeal of bearing the sins of the world. So humanly—and very understandably—Jesus wanted to avoid his Passion, including his crucifixion.

And yet, because he is the eternal Son of God, his human will is in perfect harmony with his divine will, and so he fully embraces the Father's plan of salvation, including fully experiencing on a human level the great anguish—even abandonment—associated with his Paschal Sacrifice (Matt. 27:46).

Here we see the profound mystery of the Incarnation writ large, of Jesus humanly experiencing all of the horrific suffering associated with his Passion and Death, yet always remaining perfectly united with the Father as the eternal Son of God (Luke 23:46). When we ponder what Christ lovingly endured for us in his Passion and Death, it should give us great encouragement to turn away from sin and conform ourselves more closely with his will (see CCC 618), knowing we will experience in time the peace which the world cannot give (John 14:27).

18. The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ by Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich mentions that Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Passover a day before the rest of the Jews did. Is this true?

The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ is not a reliable guide to the events of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. The book is attributed to Anne Catherine Emmerich but contains enough theological problems that the attributed writings were specifically excluded from the study of Emmerich's life before her cause for beatification proceeded. The book gained public attention when Mel Gibson used it as a source for his movie *The Passion of the Christ*. While it was fine for Gibson to use theologically unproblematic stories from the writings as literary embellishment to the Gospel narratives, the writings cannot be considered authoritative.

As to the question of whether Jesus ate the Passover meal with the disciples early, this is something we do not know for sure. It is implied though by the Gospel narratives, which recount that Jesus was crucified on the day of preparation for the Passover (John 19:14), which would have been during the day before the Seder meal was celebrated by the Jews. In Judaism, the holy days start at sundown the previous day. So, if Passover began on Saturday that year (John 19:31), the Jews would have prepared for it during the day on Friday and eaten the Seder meal on Friday evening. Since it was important to Jesus to share the Passover meal with his disciples before his crucifixion (Luke 22:15–16), by his authority as God the Son he could have chosen to eat the Passover meal a day early in anticipation of the traditional start of the Passover (Matt. 26:28–29).

19. At the foot of the cross, why/how does the “beloved disciple” stand in for all Christians?

You refer to Jesus' words to the Beloved Disciple, commonly understood to be St. John:

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home (John 19:26-27).

If the Blessed Mother actually gave birth to other children, as many Protestants mistakenly believe, it would be unthinkable to put her in the care of St. John, a non-blood relative, because the ancient Jews greatly valued family and related responsibilities.

Instead, Jesus puts his mother in the care of his apostle John. And even though John is not a son of Mary, Jesus refers to John as her son and Mary as John's mother. Mary is thus seen as the spiritual mother of all disciples.

For those who might object, we see this conclusion further affirmed in Revelation 12, as the dragon, who represents the devil, goes off "to make war on the rest of her [Mary's] offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus" (Rev. 12:17). The author makes clear he's referring to Mary, the Mother of Jesus (Rev. 12:13), meaning Mary is indeed the spiritual mother of all Christians.

20. Was Jesus dead before or after the spear to the side?

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus had already died:

When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, "It is finished." And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit. . . . So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and then of the other one who was crucified with Jesus. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs, but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out (John 19:30, 32-34).

Some have argued that the flowing of blood and water from Jesus' side is proof that he did not die until pierced with the lance. However, if the author of the Gospel was making that point, it would run contrary to the explicit theology he had already set forth in the Gospel.

The Gospel of John makes quite clear that Jesus was not merely a victim of social violence or injustice but that Jesus willingly gave of himself (John 10:18, 19:11, 19:17). Therefore, the Gospel makes clear that Jesus had already died and freely handed over his spirit prior to the piercing of the lance.

For more information on the 20 Answers Series visit Shop.Catholic.Com