

UNDERSTANDING THE GREAT FAST

The Great Fast, or Lent, is the seven week period of preparation before the celebration of Pascha. **IT IS A TURNING BACK TO GOD WHOM WE REALIZE IS THE VERY SOURCE AND GOAL OF OUR LIFE.** He is our life. By repentance we realize we aren't where we should be; we are far from our Father. Our happiness, our wholeness, our sense of identity, well-being and joy flow from being close to God as the very center of our lives.

SO LENT, THE TIME FOR REPENTANCE, IS THE TIME TO REDISCOVER THIS TRUTH, TO BE CONVINCED OF IT AND MAKE IT MORE OF A CONSCIOUS REALITY IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES. Far from being a time of morose introspection it is, as the liturgy says, the Lenten Springtime. It is liberation from the gloominess of our sins and a rediscovery of the new life given us in Holy Baptism. In the mystery of Pascha, Christ gives us a chance to be "born again" as children of God: as complete men and women possessing the life, grace and joy of God which completes and heals our nature as human beings.

Open to me the doors of repentance, O Life-Giver. For my soul goes early to the temple of your holiness, driving on the temple of my body wholly polluted. But because you are compassionate, purify me by the tenderness of your mercy, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. For I have profaned my soul with shameful sins and consumed my whole life in laziness but my own intercessions purify me from all immorality.

Post-Gospel Hymn of Lent

WHERE DID LENT COME FROM?

The early Christians kept vigil during the last few days of Holy Week. As time went on, the vigil was extended to approximately forty days. It was a period in which the catechumens (candidates to become Christians) were given a last, intensive preparation for baptism, chrismation and the Eucharist.

It was also the time when the penitents, those who had lapsed in the faith, did penance, relearning the basic and beautiful lesson of the mystery and dignity of being a Christian and our way of life in the Lord. They were reconciled with the rest of the faithful at the end of Lent.

Since the season was a type of "boot-camp in Christianity" for the catechumens and penitents, all the faithful entered into preparation with them. Lent became a type of renewal and "refresher course" for all believers intent on living of the new life in Christ given to us at Pascha.

WHY 40 DAYS?

The number forty calls up memories from our past as a people of God, of the forty years Israel wandered in the desert. As they were led by God to the Promised Land, they were tested, their faith was strengthened and they learned to know the Lord as the very center of their lives. In the same way, during Lent we are tested, our faith is deepened and we move toward the fulness of the heavenly Kingdom which is our inheritance.

It also speaks to us of the forty days Jesus spent in the desert after His baptism, when He resisted temptation, giving Himself to close communion with His Father, the source of His life. As He embraced His mission as His Father's servant and our redeemer during that time, so we try to take our own mission as Christians more seriously during the season of Great Lent.

Finally, the forty days call to mind Moses and Elijah, who spent that amount of time preparing for important encounters with God. We too will encounter Him in His paschal mysteries where He reveals to us who He is, how He loves us, who we are and the meaning of life.

Through greed we were once stripped naked, overcome by the bitter taste of the forbidden fruit, and we were exiled from God. Let us turn back in repentance, fasting from the food that gives us pleasure. Let us purify our senses on which our Enemy makes war. Let us strengthen our hearts with the hope of grace, and not with foods which brought no benefits to those who trusted in them. Our food shall be the Lamb of God on the holy and radiant night of His Rising. He is the Victim offered for us, given in communion to the Apostles on the evening of the Mysteries, who scatters the darkness of ignorance by the Light of His Resurrection!

From Vespers of Meatfare Sunday

SO WHAT SHOULD I DO DURING LENT?

Don't "do": rather "be" a lenten Christian. Live a lenten style of life. Remember the basics: You are trying to turn more fully to God (Repentance) and taste more fully the beauty and dignity that are yours as a child of God. You must think about that – which means eliminating some distractions – and seriously turn to Him. The Church has three traditional helps for this:

FASTING, PRAYER and ALMSGIVING.

They are recommended by the Scriptures and Tradition. They get to the very root of repentance, which is turning back to God. They help strip away the glitter of a false self, a false view of the world and others and aid in discovering our true identity, our relation to God, others, the world and ourselves. FASTING helps us discover our true hunger for God at the root of our being and our total dependence on Him as the source of our life and strength. PRAYER puts us in communion with Him. ALMSGIVING helps us share God, His gifts and ourselves with others, establishing a true communion with them in the Lord.

FASTING?

It is not so much giving up something as it is making space for something better to take its place: especially the things of God. We fast so that we may "lay aside all earthly cares, that we may receive the King of all".

Does your life depend on food? You must eat to live, but no matter how much you eat, you are going to die. Life depends, not on food, but on God, the Giver of life. We fast to experience that on a deep level. Fasting has been prescribed by Christ Himself. The Church can and should remove from the realm of obligation this or that exercise of fasting, but the Church cannot dispense us from Christ's command to fast. We must each comply with that command as best we can. Of course, the abstaining from food should lead to an abstaining from sin and evil.

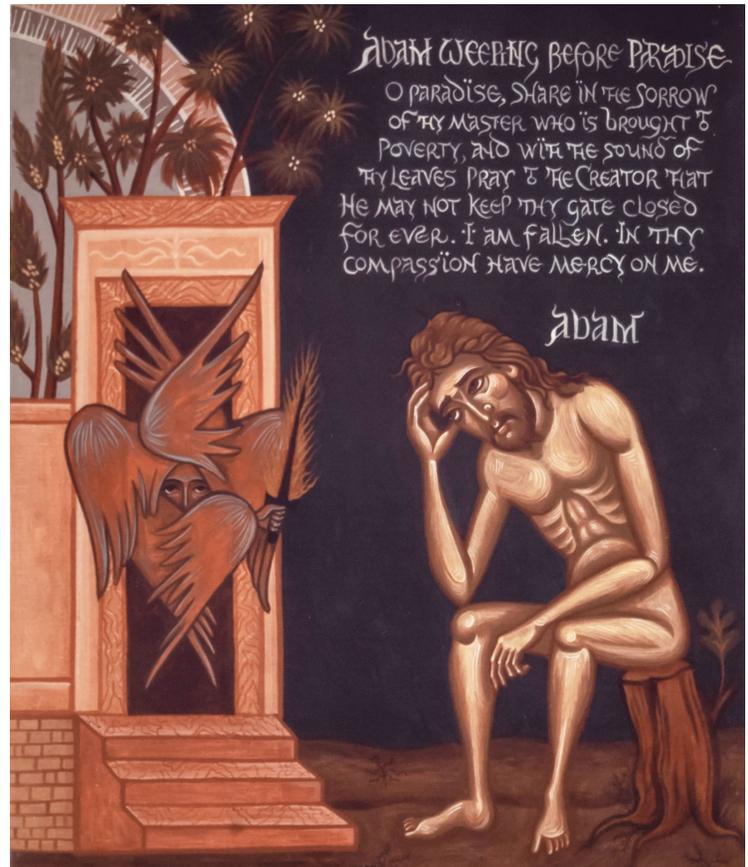
During this time, Eastern Christians regulate both the amount of food they eat and number of times they eat each day. On Saturdays and Sundays during the Great Lent the fast is relaxed in some ways.

AND ALMSGIVING?

Material gifts were given us by God as gifts over which we are to be responsible stewards. You are to use those gifts – and the gift that you are – sacramentally. All things are potentially sacramental, since they are intended for communion with God and with each other. When we share the goods of the earth in love, we are "in communion", in fellowship in and with the Lord.

How are you handling your material possessions? They are not ends in themselves, but they are meant to produce that communion with God and each other. Are they? Look around you, and the Lord will show you how to give alms, and exactly what you should share. One idea is to save the money gained by fasting and use it for charitable purposes.

We should understand why we fast and why we give alms, pray over it and then decide what is to be done in this regard during the holy season. The effort is a family affair and no one struggles alone. There will be major readjustment to diet, entertainment, and distractions, to mention a few but to struggle for holiness is always a joy; the Lord is never outdone in generosity.



WHEN DO WE START?

Our preparation has already started: for four Sundays before Lent starts the Church begins to prepare us, by directing us to think about our need for God, about repentance and fasting, God's judgement and our need to forgive one another.

The Great Fast actually begins on Clean Monday, the day after the last of these pre-Lenten Sundays, Cheese-Fare Sunday. Our first lenten service is the beautiful Forgiveness Vespers, at which we are reconciled with each other before beginning the lenten journey and are invited to take part in the mystery of confession.

The Western Church begins the holy season on Ash Wednesday with their proper services. The Eastern Churches start two days earlier because we use different counting systems to arrive at the traditional forty days. The Western lent consists of forty days excluding Sundays – leading up to Easter Sunday. The Eastern Churches keep forty days without interruption leading up to Lazarus Saturday, the first day of Holy Week. This accounts for the different starting dates.