

THE LENTEN SEASON



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Lent, the period of forty days that precedes the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, has its origin in the early Church. Those who believed and wanted to become Christians would spend several months or years in study and preparation. Under the threat of Roman persecution, becoming a Christian was serious business, and hence their process of preparation was intensive. They would usually go through a final period of "purification and enlightenment" for the forty days before their baptism on Resurrection Sunday. What began as a practice for the catechumen* was also adopted for the rest of the Church, as they began to observe the season of Lent in solidarity with these new Christians. The Lenten season hence became an opportunity for all Christians to recall and renew the commitment of their baptism.

The forty days of preparation mirrored Jesus' own preparation as He journeyed towards the cross, primarily His fasting and prayer in the wilderness before His temptation. More recently, people from various Christian denominations practise abstentions for the forty days of Lent. Usually, these may be foods, habits, or other things that give them a sense of enjoyment. It is hence not uncommon to see people give up their favourite foods, such as not eating meats or chocolates, or abstaining from coffee or sugar, or vices like smoking or gossiping. There have been others who go on a digital / social media fast, abstaining from Facebook or Instagram during this season of Lent.

Both the fasting and abstinence are meant to mirror Christ's fasting in the wilderness. They also function as demonstrations of penance and solemnity in the days leading up to Holy Week, the week that commemorates the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ and finally culminates in the celebration of His resurrection on Easter Sunday.

While Lent is closely associated with penance, fasting and abstinence, it is fundamentally not about abstentions in order to live a better or healthier life. It is coming to terms with the inevitability of death, and through it, a new life in Christ. On Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of the Lenten season, Christians are asked to reflect on death and mortality. On Ash Wednesday, at the service, the worshippers are marked with a cross on their foreheads, made from the ashes of palm branches which were used for Palm Sunday service the year before, which symbolically bring the liturgical calendar full-circle. The cyclical nature of the liturgical year means that we in some sense are invited to participate in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ each year. The ashes are also symbols of repentance and mortality, and as they are marked with the sign of the cross, with the words from Genesis 3:19: "For you are dust, and unto dust shall you return."

* "catechumen" - a person who is receiving instruction in preparation for Christian baptism or confirmation.