

What is the History of Lent?

In a Gospel passage, Matthew 9:14-15, Jesus tells the Pharisees that his disciples do not observe fasting while the bridegroom is with them. But, he says, there will be a time when the bridegroom is away and they will fast.

In our post-Resurrection period, the Church recognizes that Christ is at God's right hand but that he is still with us. Jesus said, "I will be with you until the end of time." By this, we know that the Church is the Body of Christ and that we are always wedded to the bridegroom. The Second Vatican Council reminds us that the Church, as Christ's Body, sits at the right hand of the Father.

So, why do we fast in this Season of Lent if the bridegroom is with us? Why have Lent at all?

While Christ is with His Church and there is certainly reason to celebrate, we also participate in the forty days of Lent to assist the Elect in their preparation for the Easter Sacraments, pray for sinners, and pray for ourselves. In each case, we understand that while the Bridegroom is with us, we may not be with the bridegroom in our thoughts, words, and actions.

Like the Israelites who wandered the desert for forty years, we find ourselves wandering away from God and refusing to obey all of His precepts - especially the command to Love God with our whole heart, soul, and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves.

Wandering away from God is easy. Wandering back is harder. Jesus is always calling us back to himself. As the great Christian hymn goes, "Come home, come home, Ye who are weary come home. Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling - Calling, 'O sinner, come home!'"

For those chosen to be among the Elect for Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation at Easter, Lent was designed to bring people to the bridegroom for the first time. In the early Patristic Church, these forty days included minor exorcisms, prayers for a radical departure from the world and Satan, the passing on of the Creed and the Our Father, and, in some cases, a confession of sin (without absolution.) The Church community participated in these rituals; especially during the forty days of Lent, as a way of sponsoring and welcoming their newest members into the Body of Christ.

The forty days of Lent and fasting were also designed for the Order of Penitents in the early church. The Christian movement known as the Penitents goes back to the 4th century. Those who had committed serious sins confessed their sins to the bishop or his representative and were assigned a penance that was to be carried out over a period of time. After completing their penance, they were reconciled by the bishop with a prayer of absolution offered in the midst of the community. Penance assumed many

forms, such as pilgrimages to holy sites; constructing, repairing and rebuilding churches; and caring for the poor and sick. Included in the forty days of penance was a signing of the forehead with ashes when admitting a gravely ill person to the Order of Penitents.

At the beginning of the 11th century, all the faithful would receive the imposition of ashes on the Wednesday before Lent (known later as Ash Wednesday). This was, in part, due to the Church's call to be in one with those who were repentant schismatics, heretics, adulterers, murderers, etc. It was also an opportunity for all members to recognize their own pattern of sinfulness (though not as grave) that led them from the bridegroom.

Today, we continue the practice of prayer, fasting, penance, almsgiving, as a sign of reconciliation to the bridegroom who calls us to "Come home!"

Lent is a time for all of us to renew our life in Christ. The forty days prepares us for the Easter Season where we re-commit ourselves to the Bridegroom especially as we renew our baptismal vows . . . "Do you believe in the Father?" "Do you believe in the Son?" "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" Our answer is, "I do believe!"

To believe in the Bridegroom is more than mere words. Believing in Christ is giving my all to Christ, my Lord who gives Himself to me. Our bridegroom showed us the depth of his love. Lent and Holy Week certainly remind us of that as he lays down his life for his bride, the Church.

So, while the Bridegroom is with us, we recognize that we may not always "be with" him. Before we get back in to the wedding banquet, we are encouraged to take a look at our journey with Christ. Are we wandering in a desert? If so, maybe its time to come home to the Promised Land.



Social Review

What can we do to offer assistance to those who wish to come to Christ?

The following answer comes directly from the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (no.9).

The people of God, as represented by the local Church, should understand and show by their concern that the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptised. Therefore the community must always be fully prepared in the pursuit of its apostolic vocation to give help to those who are searching for Christ. In the various circumstances of daily life, even as in the apostolate, all the followers of Christ have the obligation of spreading the faith according to their abilities. Hence, the entire community must help the candidates and the catechumens throughout the process of initiation: during the period of the precatechumenate, the period of the catechumenate, the period of purification and enlightenment, and the period of postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogy. In particular:

1. During the period of evangelization and precatechumenate, the faithful should remember that for the Church and its members the supreme purpose of the apostolate is that Christ's message is made known to the world by word and deed and that his grace is

communicated. They should therefore show themselves ready to give the candidates evidence of the spirit of the Christian community and to welcome them into their homes, into personal conversation, and into community gatherings.

2. At the celebrations belonging to the period of the catechumenate, the faithful should seek to be present whenever possible and should take an active part in the responses, prayers, singing, and acclamations.

3. On the day of election, because it is a day of growth for the community, the faithful, when called upon, should be sure to give honest and carefully considered testimony about the catechumens.

4. During Lent, the period of purification and enlightenment, the faithful should take care to participate in the rites of the scrutinies and presentations and give the example of their own renewal in the spirit of penance, faith, and charity. At the Easter Vigil, they should attach great importance to renewing their own baptismal promises.

5. During the period immediately after baptism, the faithful should take part in the Masses for neophytes, that is, the Sunday Masses of the Easter season (see no. 25), welcome the neophytes with open arms in charity, and help them to feel more at home in the community of the baptised.

