

Here comes Lent!

The Catholic Home.

In spite of all the commotion surrounding Christmas, Easter is the most sacred holy day of the Christian year. Commemorating the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, Easter has been the high point of Church celebration from the beginning. From the earliest records of Christian worship, we read about the initiation of new members on the Vigil of Easter. Of course, the celebration was not called Easter then. The Latin name for Easter is *Pascha*. Easter is a derivation of the name of a pagan goddess of fertility. It is a long story!

Because traditionally Jesus was crucified, died and resurrected over the Jewish feast of Passover, many of the customs surrounding our celebration of Easter stem from Jewish roots. For starters, the date we celebrate Easter changes every year in keeping with the original intent to connect the holiday with Passover. The council of Nicea in 325 fixed the date as the first Sunday after the vernal equinox. The Roman Church follows this custom. In observant Jewish homes, certain foods are removed from the home before Passover. In ancient Christian tradition, all meat, eggs, milk, butter, and cheese were removed from the home just prior to the start of Lent. On Shrove Tuesday Christians often held a big feast of pancakes, eggs and bacon to help consume these foods.

Lent is the period of preparation and reflection prior to the high feast of Easter. During these forty days, the Church invites each of us to examine our lives and habits with the intent to draw closer to God and to grow in a life of service. Fasting, almsgiving and prayer are the vehicles recommended by Christ to grow in the Christian life. Christ himself spent forty days and nights fasting and praying in the wilderness preparing for his public ministry. The season of Lent extends for forty days, not including Sundays.

We fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as well as abstain from meat on all Fridays of Lent. Fasting consists of eating one normal meal and two small meals during the day. No snacks may be consumed in between meals, although beverages may be consumed. Children younger than 18, the elderly or ill are exempt from the Lenten fasting requirements. For the rest of us, the fast is an opportunity to examine the extent food controls our lives, to pray more frequently and to identify with the millions who go hungry everyday. Likewise, abstaining from meat developed out of the reality that meat is a luxury for most cultures.

Asking, “What are you giving up for Lent?” is almost as ubiquitous as asking, “What do you want for Christmas?” The goal is not to suffer. The goal is to temper our passions and inclinations. If things we desire separate us from the love of God, then these things are harming us. If giving up chocolates or sweets brings you closer to God, then by all means, give them up. When it comes to pleasing God, giving something up may not be what God wants from you. Perhaps what God really wants is a change of heart. Consider the wisdom offered in Micah 6:8. “You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.” What would Lent look like if we lived liked this? What would Lent look like if we gave up vengeance, gossip, sarcasm, impatience and stinginess? What would we look like? What would our world become?