

What About ... Observing Lent?

BY ELLEN DEWITT

"In 325, the Council of Nicea discussed a 40-day Lenten season of fasting, but it's unclear whether its original intent was just for new Christians preparing for Baptism, but it soon encompassed the whole Church.

"How exactly the churches counted those 40 days varied depending on location. In the East, one only fasted on weekdays. The western church's Lent was one week shorter, but included Saturdays. But in both places, the observance was both strict and serious. Only one meal was taken a day, near the evening. There was to be no meat, fish, or animal products eaten.

"Until the 600s, Lent began on Quadragesima (Fortieth) Sunday, but Gregory the Great (c.540-604) moved it to a Wednesday, now called Ash Wednesday, to secure the exact number of 40 days in Lent—not counting Sundays, which were feast days. Gregory, who is regarded as the father of the medieval papacy, is also credited with the ceremony that gives the day its name. As Christians came to the church for forgiveness, Gregory marked their foreheads with ashes reminding them of the biblical symbol of repentance (sackcloth and ashes) and mortality: "You are dust, and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19).

"By the 800s, some Lenten practices were already becoming more relaxed. First, Christians were allowed to eat after 3 p.m. By the 1400s, it was noon. Eventually, various foods (like fish) were allowed, and in 1966 the Roman Catholic church only restricted fast days to Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. It should be noted, however, that practices in Eastern Orthodox churches are still quite strict" (Ted Olsen, "The Beginning of Lent," christianhistory.net).

"The word Lent itself is derived from the Anglo-Saxon words *lencten*, meaning "Spring," and *lenctentid*, which literally means not only "Springtide" but also was the word for "March," the month in which the majority of Lent falls. . . .the number "40" has always had special spiritual significance regarding preparation. On Mount Sinai, preparing to receive the Ten Commandments, "Moses stayed there with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights, without eating any food or drinking any water" (Ex 34:28). . . .Most importantly, Jesus fasted and prayed for "40 days and 40 nights" in the desert before He began His public ministry (Mt 4:2). . . .On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, the faithful fast (having only one full meal a day and smaller snacks to keep up one's strength) and abstain from meat; on the other Fridays of Lent, the faithful abstain from meat. People are still encouraged "to give up something" for Lent as a sacrifice" (Fr. William Saunders, "History of Lent," catholiceducation.org).

The first thing to notice is that lent is not prescribed in the Bible. It was developed as a practice of the Catholic church centuries ago. It's a tradition, not Scripture.

Just because Moses and Jesus fasted for forty days does not make "forty days" holy. They are examples of what they did.

If we fast, what should it look like? Jesus said in Matthew 6:16-18, *whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men...But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret.* So if you do fast, nobody should know about it. For sure, you should not have an ash mark on your forehead announcing it to everyone. It's to be secret, just between you and God.

But why would a Christian fast? Does that make God hear our prayers more than He would otherwise do? James 5:16 says the *prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.* Does God define righteousness as fasting? *For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* (Romans 14:17).

The common practice of lent is to give up something as a sacrifice. But if it is a good idea to give something up for forty days, why would a Christian not give it up every day? Paul wrote, *I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship* (Romans 12:1).

