

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Forty Days

If you are one of those Catholics who think Lent is merely the past tense of “lend,” you might want to lend an ear. Or, rather, an eye. The Catholic Encyclopedia online (newadvent.org/cathen/09152a.htm) has a treasure trove of information about the season we’ve entered, and there are quite a few surprises.

First up: the name. “Lent” is actually an ancient Teutonic word that means the season of spring. Evidently, the Church Fathers decided that word was catchier (in English) than the Latin *quadragesima*, which means “forty days.” It’s unclear when, exactly, the observance of Lent began, but the earliest record we have dates from the 400s. But even earlier, St. Irenæus, from the second century, wrote about fasting before Easter.

Secondly, Lent is actually longer than forty days. The forty days that are counted do not include Saturday or Sunday.

Why forty days? Aside from the strong biblical connections—Christ’s forty days in the desert, Moses’ forty years of wandering, Noah’s forty days of rain—there is the prevailing thought that Jesus spent forty hours in the tomb.

And fasting? For many faiths, the idea of fasting has been around since before the time of Christ. The Lenten fast is first mentioned in the fifth century, when a historian wrote: “Some abstain from every creature that has life, while others of all the living creatures eat of fish only.” A couple hundred years later, St. Gregory wrote: “We abstain from flesh meat, and from all things that come from flesh, as milk, cheese and eggs.”

Ah. Eggs! The encyclopedia notes: “The general prohibition of eggs and milk during Lent is perpetuated in the popular custom of blessing or making gifts of eggs at Easter, and in the English usage of eating pancakes on Shrove Tuesday.” (And you thought eggs had something to do with the Easter Bunny.)

Of course, in the last few decades, many of the customs that were once so familiar to this season have begun to disappear. Most people don’t entirely abstain from meat—Church rules only require it on Fridays—and many of us give up other things instead. Chocolate and television are two popular choices. (I’d like to see cell phones added to the list, too.) And fasting has become easier, too; it now means eating just one full meal.

Ultimately, I think, fasting during this penitential season is an outward expression of inward conversion. For these forty days, we are living in a desert—no “Alleluias” at Mass, no flowers on the altar—and fasting is an example of that. By skipping a hamburger or avoiding a candy bar, we make some small sacrifice and express a void waiting to be filled. Something is missing. We are hungry—but not merely for food. We hunger for redemption, and for the hope that finds fulfillment in an empty tomb. (How ironic that we are filled because of something left empty!)

So, let’s all go hungry, and let’s all go forward, as we journey on through the wilderness.

And when we reach our destination, on Easter Sunday, please: Pass me the pancakes.

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STATIONS OF THE CROSS

“Praying the Stations with Mary, the Mother of Jesus”
Fridays during Lent, at 7:30 p.m., followed by Benediction