

## The Lent Season

### Overview

Ash Wednesday opens the Lent season. The color is Purple and runs from Ash Wednesday to Holy Thursday for a period of 40 days counted from the first Sunday of Lent until Holy Thursday.



### The Origins for Lent

Lent is closely associated with the transition from winter to spring. The word lent comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word for springtime – *lencen*. It describes the gradual lengthening of the days after the winter solstice. Ash Wednesday officially opens Lent with an ancient ritual of penance and was identified with penitents dressing in sackcloth and covered with ashes. In those days, a penance could last years or a lifetime.

During the middle ages, the process evolved more to what we have today. It was a time a penance and fasting with no meat on Fridays. Lent is closely associated with the transition from winter to spring and began as a Christian celebration as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. In preparation for the holiest of seasons, the early church expected the return of Jesus.

Lent actually evolved around the theme of baptism as this preparation could take years in the early church. The early church also had an ancient process of bringing new people into the

church through adult catechumens with the emphasis on baptism during this period. In 1972, this process was revived with the introduction of the Rites of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA).

### A penitential theme

Beginning as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, preparation for Baptism was joined with fasting and other forms of penance in preparation for the absolution of both public sins and crimes. In some places the “there was an elaborate “funeral” as the “Alleluia” banner was buried – to symbolize the somber atmosphere.

### The Forty Days of Lent

Very early in the church the period for Lent became associated with the number 40. If you read scriptures, you will see how this number was so important to the new Christians with the many examples. Jesus spent 40 days in the desert. Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai and the Jews spent 40 years wondering through the desert.

Lent is preceded before Ash Wednesday by a celebration sometimes called “Fat Tuesday” because it was the last fling before the long 40-day fasting. Today we know this as Mardi Gras which has become a pagan festival in its own right.

### Popular devotions

Lent has several forms of devotions such as the following:

- **Stations of the Cross:** This devotion developed during the middle ages and represents the critical events of the Passion of Jesus.
- **Pretzels:** Have the origin in the early church because fat, eggs and milk were forbidden during Lent.
- **Penances:** During the Lent season, it became popular to give up certain foods.