

LENT



The word "Lent" comes from the old English, "*lencten*," which means "spring." In Middle English is derived the words, *lenten*, *lente*, *lent*; related to the Dutch, *lente*, the German, *Lenz*, also rendered "*spring*." In Old German are found the related words: *lenzin*, *lengizin*, and *lenzo*, which probably comes from the same root as "long" and referring to "the lengthening days," as the earth moves from the winter solstice toward the spring equinox.

In the Christian Church, Lent refers to the period of abstinence preparatory to the Feast of Easter. As this fast falls in the early part of the year, it became confused with the season, and gradually the word Lent, which originally meant spring, was confined to this liturgical use. The Latin name for the fast is *Quadragesima* derived from the Sunday which was the fortieth day before Easter.

The length of this fast and the rigor with which it has been observed have varied greatly at different times and in different countries. In the time of Irenaeus (second century A.D.) the fast before Easter was very short, but very severe; thus some ate nothing for forty hours between the afternoon of Good Friday and the morning of Easter. This was the only authoritatively prescribed fast known to Tertullian. In Alexandria about the middle of the 3rd century it was already customary to fast during Holy Week; and earlier still the Montanists boasted that they observed a two weeks' fast instead of one.

Of the Lenten fast or Quadragesima, the first mention is in the fifth canon of the council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), and from this time it is frequently referred to, but chiefly as a season of preparation for baptism, of

absolution of penitents or of retreat and recollection. In this season fasting played a part, but it was not universally nor rigorously enforced. At Rome, for instance, the whole period of fasting was but three weeks, according to the historian Socrates (*History of the Church*), these three weeks being not continuous but, following the primitive Roman custom, broken by intervals.



Gradually, however, the fast as observed in East and West became more rigorously defined. In the East, where after the example of the Church of Antioch, the Quadragesima fast had been kept distinct from that of Holy Week, the whole fast came to last

for seven weeks, both Saturdays and Sundays (except Holy Saturday) being, however, excluded. In Rome and Alexandria, and even in Jerusalem, Holy Week was included in Lent and the whole fast lasted but six weeks, Saturdays, however, not being exempt. Both at Rome and Constantinople, therefore, the actual fast was but thirty-six days. Some Churches still continued the three weeks' fast, but by the middle of the 5th century most of these divergences had ceased and the usages of Antioch-Constantinople and Rome-Alexandria had become stereotyped in their respective spheres of influence.

The thirty-six days, as forming a tenth part of the year and therefore a perfect number, at first found a wide acceptance. But the inconsistency of this period with the name Quadragesima, and with the forty days' fast of Christ, came to be noted, and early in the 7th century four days were added, by what pope is unknown, so that Lent in the West would begin henceforth on Ash Wednesday.

About the same time the cycle of paschal solemnities was extended to the ninth week before Easter by the institution of stational masses for

Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima Sundays. At Constantinople, too, three Sundays were added and associated with the Easter festival in the same way as the Sundays in Lent proper. These three Sundays were added in the Greek Church also, and the present custom of keeping an eight weeks' fast (i.e. exactly 8 X 5 days), now universal in the Eastern Church, originated in the 7th century. The Greek Lent begins on the Monday of Sexagesima, with a week of preparatory fasting, known as the "butter-week"; the actual fast, however, starts on the Monday of Quinquagesima this week being known as "the first week of the fast" The period of Lent is still described as "the six weeks of the fast", the seven days of Holy Week not being reckoned in.

The Lenten fast was retained at the Reformation in some of the reformed Churches, and is still observed in the Anglican and Lutheran communions. In England a Lenten fast was first ordered to be observed by Earconberht, king of Kent (A.D. 640-664). In the middle ages, meat, eggs and milk were forbidden in Lent not only by ecclesiastical but by statute law; and this rule was enforced until the reign of King William III. The chief Lenten food from the earliest days was fish, and entries in the royal household accounts of Edward III show the amount of fish supplied to the king. Herring-pies were a great delicacy. Charters granted to seaports often stipulated that the town should send so many herrings or other fish to the king annually during Lent.

How severely strict medieval abstinence was may be gauged from the fact that armies and garrisons were sometimes, in default of dispensations, as in the case of the siege of Orleans in 1429, reduced to starvation for want of Lenten food, though in full possession of meat and other supplies. The battle of the Herrings (February 1429) was fought in order to cover the march of a convoy of Lenten food to the English army besieging Orleans. Dispensations from fasting were, however, given in case of illness.

During the religious confusion of the Reformation, the practice of fasting was generally relaxed and it was found necessary to reassert the obligation

of keeping Lent and the other periods and days of abstinence by a series of proclamations and statutes. In these, however, the religious was avowedly subordinate to a political motive, i.e. to prevent the ruin of the fisheries, which were the great nursery of English seamen. Thus the statute of 2 and 3 Edward VI, (1549), while inculcating that "due and godly abstinence from flesh is a means to virtue," adds that "by the eating of fish much flesh is saved to the country," and that thereby, too, the fishing trade is encouraged. The statute, however, would not seem to have had much effect; for in spite of a proclamation of Queen Elizabeth in 1560 imposing a fine of £ 20 for each offence on butchers slaughtering animals during Lent.

In 1563 Sir William Cecil, in *Notes upon an Act for the Increase of the Navy*, says that "in old times no flesh at all was eaten on fish days; even the king himself could not have license; which was occasion of eating so much fish as now is eaten in flesh upon fish days." The revolt against fish had ruined the fisheries and driven the fishermen to turn pirates, to the great scandal and detriment of the realm. Accordingly, in the session of 1562-1563, Cecil forced upon an unwilling parliament "a politic ordinance on fish eating," by which the eating of meat on fast days was made punishable by a fine of three pounds or three months' imprisonment, one meat dish being allowed on Wednesdays on condition that three fish dishes were present on the table. The kind of argument by which Cecil overcame the Protestant temper of the parliament is illustrated by a clause which he had meditated adding to the statute, a draft of which in his own handwriting is preserved: "Because no person should misjudge the intent of the statute," it runs, "which is politicly meant only for the increase of fishermen and mariners, and not for any superstition for choice of meats; whoever shall preach or teach that eating of fish or forbearing of meat is for the saving of the soul of man, or for the service of God, shall be punished as the spreader of false news".

But in spite of statutes and proclamations, of occasional severities and of the patriotic example of Queen Elizabeth, the practice of fasting fell more and more into disuse.

Ostentatious avoidance of a fish-diet became, indeed, one of the outward symbols of militant Protestantism among the Puritans. "I have often noted," writes John Taylor, the water-poet, in his *Jack a Lent* (1620), "that if any superfluous feasting or gormandizing, paunch-cramming assembly do meet, it is so ordered that it must be either in Lent, upon a Friday, or a fasting: for the meat does not relish well except it be sauced with disobedience and contempt of authority." The government continued to struggle against this spirit of defiance. The proclamations of James I in 1619 and 1625, and of Charles I in 1627 and 1631, again commanded abstinence from all meat during Lent, and the High Church movement of the 17th century lent a fresh religious sanction to the official attitude. So late as 1687, James II issued a proclamation ordering abstention from meat; but, after the Glorious Revolution (1690's), the Lenten laws fell obsolete, though they remained on the statute-book till repealed by the Statute Law Revision Act 1863.

But during the 18th century, though the strict observance of the Lenten fast was generally abandoned, it was still observed and inculcated by the more earnest of the clergy, such as William Law and John Wesley; and the custom of women wearing mourning in Lent, which had been followed by Queen Elizabeth and her court, survived until well into the 19th century. With the growth of the Oxford Movement in the English Church, the practice of observing Lent was revived; and, though no rules for fasting are authoritatively laid down, the duty of abstinence was now very generally inculcated by bishops and clergy, either as a discipline or as an exercise in self-denial. For the more "advanced" Churches, Lenten practice tended to conform to that of the pre-Reformation Church.

Throughout the twentieth century a growing number of Protestant and Evangelical ecclesial bodies have seen a restoration of Lenten observance. If this trend continues Lent may once again become a universal Christian practice.