Lenten traditions around the globe

As early as the third century, St. Irenaeus discussed Lenten preparation for Easter, talking about what the “forefathers” in faith, meaning the apostles, did to prepare for Easter. However, in St. Irenaeus’ day, no Churchwide consensus existed on how long Lent should be. It wasn’t until the Council of Nicaea (325) that “the 40 days of Lent” began to be discussed. St. Athanasius urged a 40-day fast, as did St. Cyril of Alexandria.

Finally, Pope St. Leo (d. 461) specifically instructed that Christians must “fulfill with their fasts the apostolic institution of the 40 days,” an admonition that has remained in place ever since.

As a universal Church, Catholics around the world spend those 40 days focused on prayer, fasting, reception of the sacraments, the practice of charity and almsgiving in preparation of the joyful resurrection of Our Lord and Savior on Easter morning. Yet that doesn’t mean Catholics throughout the world haven’t put their own stamp on Lenten devotions and customs.

Here is a look at some international traditions, as well as some from ethnic parishes here in the United States, celebrated right before or during the penitential season.

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Season’s Special Days

Ash Wednesday: Despite being one of the most attended holy days of the year by Catholics around the world, this is not an official holy day of obligation. The ashes are traditionally made by burning last year’s Palm Sunday palms. In the United

States, the custom is to mark the cross on a person's forehead, but in other parts of the world, including in Italy, the ashes are sprinkled on a person's head.

Laetare Sunday: The fourth Sunday of Lent marks the halfway point between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Rose-colored vestments may be worn in place of the normal purple, in honor of the word "laetare," or "be joyful," which comes from the Introit at Mass. In addition, the "golden rose" is traditionally blessed on this Sunday. The golden rose is a gold ornament, blessed by the pope during Mass and later given as a sign of reverence or affection to churches, governments or individuals. No one knows exactly when the custom began, but Pope Leo IX talked about it in 1051. No individual has been given a golden rose since the 1960s.

Spy Wednesday: The Wednesday of Holy Week, it recalls Judas' spying on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before turning him over to the high priest.

Maundy Thursday, or Holy Thursday: On this day Christians commemorate the Last Supper. The name Maundy probably comes from the Latin mandatum, the first word in John 13:34: Mandatum novum do vobis ut diligatis invicem sicut dilexi vos. ("A new commandment I give unto you, That you love one another; as I have loved you.")

Good Friday: The day that commemorates the death of our Lord Jesus Christ is a national holiday in many countries, especially those of Catholic origin.

Holy Saturday and the Easter Vigil: These used to be timed so that the Vigil ended just as the sun rose, recalling how the women found the tomb empty just after daybreak. Nowadays, parishes celebrate sometime after sunset on Holy Saturday or at midnight.

Lent in a Polish Parish

Father Joseph E. Swierczynski, pastor of Immaculate Heart of Mary in Pittsburgh, Pa., told OSV about Lenten traditions in his parish.

Devotions: Each year the parish hosts Gorzkie-Zale, or Polish Lamentations. The lamentations are sung in Polish and mark the sorrows of Jesus Christ during his passion. The entire diocese is invited to attend, and Bishop David Zubik will preside at this year's serivce. At least 300 to 400 people usually attend. Every Friday during Lent, there is exposition, then recitation of the Divine Mercy chaplet and benediction.

Holy Saturday: People bring in the food they are going to eat on Easter Sunday for a blessing of the baskets. Common items are bread, eggs, ham, kielbasa, butter, cheeses, lamb, cake baked in the shape of a lamb, and, Father Swierczynski added, "horseradish, of course."

Lent in an African-American Parish

Msgr. Charles Pope, pastor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian in Washington, D.C., told OSV about Lenten traditions in his parish.

Liturgy: The scrutinies are celebrated with some vigorousness. "It's a fairly big part of the liturgy during Lent," he said. "We usually spend a little time with the scrutinies."

Triduum: The parish has choral Stations of the Cross, with dramatic readings celebrated with the choir. "Each Good Friday, people come around the city for the service," he said. The Easter Vigil is lengthy, with a dramatic version of the Exsultet sung. One of the things that is notable is that the parish has baptism by full immersion.

Group study: "One thing we have is called Soup And Scripture," he said. "It's a focused Bible study in Lent. A light meal is

served, people stay and study the word of God for an hour and a half.”

Lent in a Hispanic Parish

Holy Thursday: In many Hispanic parishes, in addition to the traditional foot washing, there is a blessing of a special bread call pan bendito (“blessed bread”), which is then passed out after the Mass that can be shared with those who are sick or otherwise unable to attend the liturgy. In addition, some parishes decorate the altar on which the Blessed Sacrament is placed with flowers and candles. The candles are blessed and taken home to be used in power outages or during storms to remind parishioners of Christ’s presence.

Good Friday: A widespread practice among Hispanic Catholics is re-enacting the Via Crucis – Way of the Cross – on the streets, with a procession. In addition, there are often Siete Palabras meditations, or meditations on the last seven words of Jesus, often with solemn music and liturgical dancing. Another popular Good Friday devotion is called Pesame, which offers condolences to the Virgin Mary under her title of Our Lady of Sorrows for the sorrow she felt as she saw her son crucified. The service often includes a procession, Marian prayers and music.

Lent in a Melkite Greek Parish

Fasting: Clean Monday, which is the first day of Lent, and the last three days of Holy Week are days of fasting (forgoing food from midnight to noon, then one meal afterward) and abstinence, while all Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence (meat, dairy products, eggs, alcohol, fish and olive oil). In addition, many devout Eastern-rite Catholics treat every day of Lent as a day of fast and abstinence, with the exception of Saturdays and Sundays.

Divine Liturgy: There is usually no Divine Liturgy (akin to

Mass for Latin-rite Catholics) on weekdays during Lent.

Prostration: During Lent, Eastern Catholics kneel at certain prayers and touch their foreheads to the ground as a sign of sorrow for sins, penance, humility.

Sources: Melkite Greek Catholic Church Eparchy of Newton, Mass., Melkite Greek Catholic Church Information Center

International Recipes

Want to add a little international flair to your meatless meals during the Fridays of Lent? Catholic Relief Service's Operation Rice Bowl offers suggestions for meatless meals from Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and India at here. Here are a few examples:

Haitian Riz National

1 onion, chopped

3 cloves garlic, minced

1 green bell pepper, chopped

2 Tbsp oil

1 cup rice, uncooked

2 cans kidney beans, drained

1/2 tsp cumin

1/4 tsp salt

1/4 tsp oregano

1/4 tsp crushed red pepper flakes

2 1/2 cups water

Preheat oven to 350°F. Fry onion, garlic and green pepper in

oil until tender. In a separate bowl, combine and mix all remaining ingredients. Add the onion mixture to the bowl and stir well.

Pour mixture into a medium-sized casserole dish. Cover and bake until liquid is absorbed and rice is tender, about an hour. Stir before serving.

Makes 4-5 servings.

Congolese Saka-Madesu

2 cans white beans

1 onion and/or 1 leek, chopped

2 tablespoons oil

1 package frozen kale, spinach or collard greens

Pinch of baking soda

1 vegetable bouillon cube

Green bell pepper, chopped

4–6 cups rice, cooked

Drain and rinse beans. Fry onion and/or leek in oil until soft. Combine all ingredients except rice in a large pot with water to cover. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer for 1 to 2 hours, until all is tender. Serve with rice.

This recipe serves 4 to 6 people.

Kadai Aloo (Indian Potato Curry)

4 large potatoes, cut into cubes with skin on

1/2 tsp ginger

1/2 tsp coriander

1/4 tsp turmeric

1/4 tsp pepper

1/2 tsp cumin

juice from 1/2 lime

1 onion, thinly sliced

1 red pepper, thinly sliced

2 jalapeño peppers, diced

3 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1 tomato, diced

2 Tbsp oil

Salt (to taste)

Boil potatoes until soft, then drain water and allow to cool. Mix all dry spices and lime juice in a bowl with potatoes, and set aside.

In a large pan, sauté garlic, onions, red pepper, and jalapeños in oil until they are tender. Add tomatoes and cook for 3 minutes. Add seasoned potatoes and cook for 5 minutes or until mixture is hot. Add salt to taste. Serve hot.

Optional: Garnish with chopped cilantro.

This recipe serves 6 people.

By Any Other Name

The word “Lent,” from the Old English word “lencten,” for “spring,” was first used in the late Middle Ages when the pastors began to preach homilies in the vernacular instead of Latin. Before that, the season was called by the Latin term quadragesima, meaning the “40th day” before Easter.

Romance languages retain this sense, for example, Spanish *cuaresma*, Portuguese quaresma, French carême and Italian quaresima.