

# Think fast! It's Lent

Lent is underway, here are a few fun facts (can the facts be called "fun" during Lent?) that may make its observation more fruitful.

## What is Lent?

Derived from the word lencten, which is Anglo-Saxon for springtime, Lent is the 40-day season of preparation prior to Easter. It begins on Ash Wednesday.

## Why is Lent 40 days?

In the Bible, the number 40 represents a period of testing or judgment. Lent's duration of 40 days reflects several other times of trial, testing and hardship found in the Scriptures:

- The story of Noah tells of rain falling on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights (see Gn 7:11-23).
- Moses fasted for 40 days before beginning his mission (Ex 34:28).
- The Hebrews wandered for 40 years in the desert after leaving Egypt (Jos 5:6).
- Jesus fasted and prayed in the desert for 40 days before beginning his ministry (Mt 4:2; Mk 1:12; Lk 4:1-2).

In Church history, penitents – usually guilty of public scandals such as murder or adultery – were temporarily expelled for the entire season in imitation of God's expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. They were sent away with the admonition, "Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return." They lived isolated for the 40 days of Lent. This temporary separation gave us the word quarantine, whose root is Latin for the number 40. You can hear the association in Spanish. The word for the number 40 is cuarenta while the name for Lent is cuaresma.

## **Fasting vs. Abstinence**

Also of biblical origins are the Lenten customs of fasting and abstinence. Although often used interchangeably, fasting refers to the amount of food consumed, while abstinence describes the type of food denied, such as meat on Fridays.

## **Why are the statues covered during Lent in my parish?**

The draping of statues and crucifixes in purple cloth is a sign of mourning. This symbolically hides the heavenly glory realized by the saints. Commencing with the Fifth Sunday of Lent, the covering of the sacred images adds to the sense of introspection and contrition. Some parishes no longer partake in this tradition.

## **My parish prays the Stations of the Cross during Lent. How did this custom originate?**

The Stations of the Cross originated during the Crusades, when it was popular to visit Jerusalem to follow the steps to Calvary. After the Holy Land was captured, making pilgrimages there became a very dangerous affair. A desire arose to reproduce these holy places in other lands as a substitute pilgrimage.

It soon became popular to have outdoor markers indicate not only the scenes in Christ's path to Golgotha, but also the actual distances from location to location. Crude markers eventually gave way to elaborate artwork depicting the events of Jesus' trial, torture and execution. By the middle of the 18th century, the Stations were allowed inside churches and served as a focus for Lenten devotions.

The Stations help the participant make a spiritual pilgrimage to the major scenes of Christ's sufferings and death. Prayers are said until the entire route is complete, enabling the faithful to more literally take up their cross and follow Jesus.

*Dan Gonzalez writes the blog, [Mass Explained](#).*