

Sunday, February 21

The First Sunday of Lent: As we begin this sacred season of spiritual striving, it is useful to reflect on the history and meaning of Lent.

Originally the word *Lent*, now associated exclusively with the observance of the liturgical year, was simply the Anglo-Saxon for “spring” and had no directly religious significance. In English usage, however, its reference was gradually limited to mean the season of preparation for Easter that does, in fact, occur in spring.

In most other languages of Western Christianity the word for Lent is some variant of “forty,” derived from the Latin *quadagesima*. Traditionally this was a period of 40 days of fasting in imitation of the Lord himself, who observed exactly that length of time in fasting prior to the beginning of his earthly ministry. It was also associated with the 40-day fast of Moses on Mount Sinai and of Elijah as he journeyed to that same mountain.

As early as the second century we already find Easter being the preferred time for the baptism of new Christians. The reasons are rather obvious. It is in the Sacrament of Baptism, after all, that Christians are mystically buried and rise with Christ (cf. Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12).

It may surprise modern Christians, however, to learn how important it was to earlier believers that some period of prayer and fasting, by way of preparation, should precede the ritual of Baptism. Even the Apostle Paul prayed and fasted for three days prior to being baptized (Acts 9:9,11,18).

In *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (Didache)*, a work from Syria probably to be dated before A.D. 100, there is the prescription that says: “Prior to Baptism, both he who is baptizing and he who is being baptized should fast, along with any others who can. And be sure that the one who is to be baptized fasts for one or two days beforehand” (7.4). One notes in this context that this fasting is a sort of joint or community effort, involving more than the personal devotion of the one being baptized.

That communal aspect of the pre-baptismal fasting is even clearer in a text some

half-century or so later. Writing a defense of the Christians to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the Christian apologist Justin described how newcomers to the faith went about getting themselves baptized: “As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their past sins, while we pray and fast with them. Then they are brought by us to where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated” (*First Apology* 61). Written in Rome, this text also shows that the pre-baptismal fast by Christian congregations was not a practice limited to Syria.

Indeed, within the next half-century we find that discipline referred to in North Africa. In chapter 20 of his treatise *On Baptism*, the Christian apologist Tertullian remarks: “They who are about to be baptized ought to pray with repeated prayers, fasts, and bending of the knee, and vigils all the night through, along with the confession of all their prior sins.” He does not explicitly say that the fasting period should last 40 days, but he does link it to the 40-day fast of Jesus recorded in the Gospels.

Gradually, however, the Christians did settle on a period of 40 days, and the custom was so firmly in place by the year 325 that the Council of Nicaea, the same council that definitively fixed the canon of the New Testament, also determined that the 40 days preceding Easter should be a special time of prayer and fasting in preparation for the baptisms to be done on that day. Such were the origins of the season of Lent, which Christians from the fourth century onwards were very convinced were rooted in the time and teaching of the apostles themselves.

The fasting observed during this season is not, needless to say, total. Over the centuries it especially came to mean simply a tougher, more disciplined diet, excluding more “substantial” foods like meat and dairy products. Such fasting is accompanied by other practices of restraint, to encourage concentration on the things of God and the health of the soul. For example, many Christians foreswear watching television during this season. These disciplines are normally part of a stricter seasonal regimen, of which an important component is giving more time and attention to the study of Holy Scripture.