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Lent: a season of communal preparation

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Essays in Theology

Ash Wednesday, which begins the season of Lent, is observed this year on Wednesday, Feb. 17.

The word "Lent" is derived from an old English word which means "springtime." The Latin adverb *lente* means "slowly."

On the basis of etymology alone, Lent signals the onset of spring and invites us, at the same time, to slow down our usual pace of activity and to take stock of our lives.

But Lent obviously means much more than the coming of spring. Indeed, in the Southern Hemisphere it is fall, not spring, that is on the way.

The etymology of the word offers one approach to disclosing the point and purpose of Lent. The liturgical route provides another, more productive path. The season of Lent is, in the final accounting, a preparation for Easter.

Members of the church prepare for the renewal of their baptismal vows at the Easter Vigil and for the annual celebration of the greatest of Christian feasts. Catechumens, on the other hand, prepare for Baptism and their full initiation into the church.

However, the name "catechumen" would eventually lose its significance, and by the Middle Ages the catechumenate, for all practical purposes, no longer existed.

During the first three centuries, most Christians prepared for Easter by fasting for only two or three days. But by the fourth century this pre-Easter fast developed into our now-established Lent of 40 days. Nevertheless, it was still viewed as a preparation for Easter and the baptism of new Christians.

Beginning in the fifth and sixth centuries, as the number of adult baptisms sharply declined in relation to the baptism of infants, the need to prepare adults for Baptism at the Easter Vigil receded.

Lent was gradually transformed into a time of prayer and penance, modeled on a 40-day, post-Epiphany fast popular among monks, in imitation of the fasting and penance practiced by Jesus during his 40 days in the desert.

Then with the liturgical renewal advanced by Pope Pius XII's restoration of the rites of Holy Week in 1956 and by the Second Vatican Council's retrieval of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), Lent, on the one hand, and Baptism and Easter, on the other, were happily re-connected.

Once again, Lent came to be seen and experienced as a season in preparation for Easter?preparation not just for individuals, but for the whole community of faith.

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With the restored RCIA, Lent served anew as the "home stretch," as it were, of the long process of the initiation of new converts into full membership in the church.

On the First Sunday of Lent there is the formal enrollment of the names of the catechumens, known also as the rite of election. This rite ratifies the catechumens' readiness for the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) and provides an opportunity for them to express their desire to receive these sacraments.

There follows a period of purification and enlightenment, embracing the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent, in which catechumens are encouraged to purify their minds and hearts from temptation and sin, and to deepen their union with Christ.

The climax of this process is reached at the Easter Vigil, but it does not end there. A "suitable period" of post-baptismal catechesis, known as mystagogy (which is derived from a Greek word, meaning "to teach a doctrine," or "to instruct into the mysteries"), continues the new convert's instruction of the Christian moral life, the sacraments, the Trinity, and prayer.

Although it has been over 40 years since the restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and over 50 years since the reform of the Holy Week liturgies, there are still many Catholics who continue to regard Lent in less liturgically appropriate ways.

For these Catholics, Lent remains a season devoted to prayer and penance (surely good and holy things in themselves), but without explicit reference to Baptism, to the Easter Vigil, or to their own responsibility for nurturing the faith-development of new Christians, including their active participation in the church's sacramental and ministerial life.

For many, Lent is still primarily, if not exclusively, a time for personal asceticism and private devotions: giving up things like candy, movies, and hand-held games, or attending daily Mass, as if the Mass itself were a private devotion, like Stations of the Cross.

The Eucharist is a communal celebration, not a penance. It is the center of the church's entire life, including the season that is about to begin.

Just as Lent is directed toward Baptism and Easter, so Baptism and Easter are directed always toward the Eucharist, the heart of everything the church does.

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