

LENT

To understand Lent you have to understand that Easter was the prime, and at one time the only, occasion for the celebration of Christian initiation - Baptism, Confirmation, and first Communion. All of this took place at the Paschal Vigil, which ran in Rome from about 10 30 on Easter Saturday until dawn on Easter Sunday.

The period of preparation for the sacraments of initiation (the *catechumenate*) included intellectual and spiritual elements. The learning of the Gospel and other scriptures was accompanied by doctrinal teaching of some intensity. Liturgical rites, such as the handing-over (*traditio*) to the catechumen of the Gospels, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, punctuated the programme.

Of varying length (typically two years) the period culminated in an intensive final process, originally about a fortnight long, but later expanded, with a comprehensive examination (*scrutinium*) of the catechumen's life in order to discern the sincerity and change of life-style (*conversio morum*) appropriate to a new Christian. This **conversion** was acknowledged as the action of grace on the individual, a fact expressed by the celebration of **exorcisms**. The pagan way of life was in such sharp contrast to the Christian, that conversion was an extreme change. It could never have been confused with mere decency, much less with niceness.

The seriousness was not lessened by the danger of a religious conversion that disabled one from much public life; the army and the Roman system of government were secured by pagan rites (the *sacramentum*, or soldier's oath, involved the offering of incense to the genius of the divine Emperor). Christians whose loyalty was questioned would be obliged to refuse such rites, and their treachery could then be taken as proven. Exorcism was the expulsion of the spirit of the world, to make room for the indwelling of the Spirit of God. It was frequently accompanied by **anointing**, which *sealed* the ports of sense (eyes, nose, ears, mouth, and hands) to prevent the re-entry of the mundane spirit.

The turning-away from the rewards of the world was sacrificial, and this was expressed by **fasting**, which removes various motives from the aspirant's life, and establishes the religious motive in their place. Because the end of all this striving is the incorporation of the candidate into the body of Christ, which is the Church, **almsgiving**, the growth of charity, would give proof of genuine commitment to the community. All of these elements would be held together by a wholehearted life of **prayer**.

With the development of daily Eucharists, the six weeks of the period acquired a complex Lectionary and a massive variety of liturgical texts, missal-prayers, and Divine Offices directed towards the needs of the catechumens in this time.

It was very early on that the rest of the Church interested itself in this experience of the catechumens. The teaching programme was shared by others as a refresher-course, and the prayer was shared in order to incorporate the prayer of the catechumens in the prayer of the community. As Easter was the great celebration of Baptism, the notion of Lenten renewal gave birth to the renewal of baptismal promises by the whole Church at the Easter Vigil. Lent, in fact, had arrived.

A further resolution came with the onset of sacramental absolution from sin. Lent became the great season for penance, and the baptismal conversion became relatively obscured by the calling of the already-baptised to repentance for their sins. This orchestrated penance

could take the form of public segregation, by the use of special clothing (the biblical sackcloth and ashes) or special parts of the church building reserved for public penitents.

The rite of entry into Lent (now identified as “the Great Fast”) became the imposition of ashes at this stage. The increased importance given to fasting probably suggested the increased length of Lent, modelling itself on the forty days of Jesus’ fast in the wilderness. There is little spiritual relationship between this ascetic framing of the fast, in a context of struggle against evil, and the former, strictly liturgico/sacramental one. The original formula for the imposition of ashes (*Remember, man, that you are dust: to dust you will return*) has recently been augmented by *Repent, and believe the Good News* - a considerable and welcome re-voicing of the theme.

It will easily be seen that Lent is no simple reality, but a very rich spiritual phenomenon. The organic relationship between the celebration of Baptism and the Lenten Triad (prayer, fasting and almsgiving) gives the programme a quite specific focus. Constant care must be taken to ensure that the practices associated with Lent are not removed from their setting or undertaken for their own sake. People sometimes confuse fasting with slimming, for example, or Christian prayer with recreational calm; and what is essentially a time for *relationship* (with God, with the Church, with the world that needs the Gospel and the sacraments) can become self-obsessed, solepistic, escapist. Asceticism can be perceived extremely negatively, as a form of power-freakery or self-mastery which pays no worship to the grace of God. Many a modern Pelagian sets out to conquer a bad habit (*give it up for Lent*) with the same kind of mindset as the New Year’s Resolution.

This is not the spirit of Lent.