

Lent – Based on Baptism

Why do we celebrate Lent and why is it a penitential season?

Here are some of the historical factors to answer that question, but the bottom line is BAPTISM.

In the early centuries of Christianity, it became clear that the most appropriate time to celebrate baptism was at the celebration of Easter.

At that time, Baptism was almost exclusively a sacrament bestowed on adults. There was also a preparation period before the celebration of Baptism, very similar to the period of purification we celebrate with catechumens (those to be baptized) in the RCIA process. This period of preparation lasted from three to six weeks.

After the Peace of Constantine in 313, the Church saw the introduction of infant baptism and a growing focus on the need to reconcile people within the community. Thus, the season of Lent became penitential.

Over time a formal process, the Order of Penitents, began to be practiced so that those who had been away from the community because of serious public sin, i.e. murder, adultery or apostasy, could be reconciled and once again receive communion at the celebration of Easter.

The number 40 was decided on to coincide with Jesus' 40 days in the desert and other journeys of 40 days found in the scriptures. The use of ashes and sackcloth became associated with the Order of Penitents as the outward and public sign that one had made the decision to seek forgiveness.

On Ash Wednesday, we all received ashes on our forehead as a sign that we too understand that our lives are not perfect and we need to reconcile ourselves not only with God but maybe with our community, i.e. family, work, or the larger world community.

During this season of Lent may each of us realize that we, like the catechumens, are preparing ourselves to come to the waters of Easter.

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