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# The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop  
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## THE WAY WE WERE... *during Lent*

*Ash Wednesday is February 21 this year, and as always, it will mark the beginning of Lent. The Lenten season used to be much more of a contact sport than it is now. The laws with regard to fasting and abstaining from meat meant that every day, and perhaps every meal, required at least a bit of care and attention. The faithful were urged to make other, additional sacrifices, such as "giving up" favorite foods or luxury items, doing extra good works, making weightier contributions to church and charities, and attending religious services more regularly and more often. Although parts of the old Lenten regime are intact, much of it has gone by the boards, officially or unofficially, and we find ourselves well along the way that would turn Lent into not much more than Ordinary Time with purple vestments.*

*For some people this is just fine, but others would like to see more, and those who look for more will perhaps inevitably search the past for some hints as to what might yet be done in Lent and how our experience of the season might be made more intense. The following are excerpts from the Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs by Francis X. Weiser, S.J. Written in 1952 and long out of print, it is both a fun read and a marvelous resource for anyone interested in taking another look at how we used to be.*

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**W**ithin the history of the Church Lent is the season of penitential and prayerful preparation for the great feast of Easter. This pen-

ance was practiced from the earliest times by strict fasting, additional prayer services, and by other penitential exercises which were of obligation for those who had committed public sins and crimes, and in which the other faithful joined more and more during medieval times in token of humble, voluntary penance.

The external manifestation of the penitential character of Lent is apparent in the liturgical color (purple), and in the discontinuance of Alleluia, Gloria, and *Te Deum* in all seasonal Masses and Offices starting with Septuagesima. From Ash Wednesday on, organs remain silent, solemn weddings and other joyous celebrations in church are prohibited.

In the ancient Church Lent was also the season of immediate preparation for baptism (*scrutinia*: investigations). The catechumens were not only instructed but also frequently questioned about their knowledge and understanding of what they had been taught. A public scrutiny took place, in which the bishop carefully ascertained whether they had given up all habits of sinful living. They had to produce witnesses who would testify as to their sincerity and purity of motive.

The thought of Christ's Passion, which now is predominant in popular devotion all through Lent, is reflected in the liturgy only during the last two weeks of the season (Passiontide).

The Mass texts of Lent are of very early origin: they go back before the time of Gregory the Great (604). Only the Thursday Masses are of later date; Gregory II (731) introduced them.

A unique feature of these weekday masses is the *Oratio super populum* (Prayer over the People) after the *Postcommunio*. This prayer used to be recited in every mass throughout the year in the fifth and sixth centuries, but was later replaced by the “Blessing of the Faithful,” which came into the Roman liturgy from the Gallic-Frankish observance. Only in Lent has it been retained up to the present.

From the time of the Apostles the Church has singled out two days of the week for special observance: in honor of Christ’s resurrection, Sunday replaced the ancient Sabbath as the new “Day of the Lord,” while in memory of His death, Friday became a weekly day of fast. In addition, a strict two-day fast was kept from Good Friday to Easter Sunday by many early Christians who did not eat or drink at all during that period. The practice of this “Passion fast” was based on the Lord’s word: “The days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day” (Mk 2:20).

Eventually, a longer period of fasting was introduced in preparation for Easter, although its observance varied widely in the early centuries. Some churches fasted only in Holy Week, others for two or more weeks. Sunday was always excepted from the fast (in the Eastern Churches, Saturday as well). During the third and fourth centuries most churches gradually adopted a forty days’ fast, in imitation of Christ, Who had fasted forty days in the desert (Lk 4:2). Saint Athanasius (373), Patriarch of Alexandria, after having traveled to Rome and over the greater part of the Roman Empire in Europe, wrote in the year 339 that “the whole world” fasted forty days.

How did Christians fast in times past? The various forms of fast and abstinence in the first centuries made for confusion, but gradually there emerged general rules which eventually became the accepted practice in the whole Church. In a letter to Saint Augustine of Canterbury (604), Pope Saint Gregory the Great announced the final form of abstinence which soon became the law: “We abstain from flesh

meat and from all things that come from flesh, as milk, cheese, eggs” (and butter, of course). For almost a thousand years this remained the norm of abstinence for all except those who were excused for reasons of ill health. In fact, the Eastern Churches (and many pious people among the Slavic nations of the Latin Church) still keep their fast in this manner: they don’t touch meat or eggs or butter all through Lent, not even on Sundays.

The observance of Lent also includes the *jejunium* (fast in the strict sense). Its early practice consisted of eating only once a day, toward evening; nothing else except a little water was taken all day. After the eighth century, the time for this one and only meal was advanced to the hour of None in the liturgical prayer (meaning the ninth hour of the Roman day, which is three o’clock in the afternoon). This meal was gradually transferred to the middle of the day (hence our word noon, from None). The noonday meal did not become a general practice until the fourteenth century.

Saint Basil the Great (379), Archbishop of Caesaria in Asia Minor, vividly described in one of his sermons the widespread observance of the fast in the fourth century (and by “fasting” he meant only *one* meal a day): *There is no island, no continent, no city or nation, no distant corner of the globe, where the proclamation of Lenten fast is not listened to. Armies on the march and travelers on the road, sailors as well as merchants, all alike bear the announcement and receive it with joy. Let no man then separate himself from the number of fasters, in which every race of mankind, every period of life, every class of society is included.*

The severity of the ancient rule was applied very sensibly at all times by the Church authorities. Saint John Chrysostom (407), Patriarch of Constantinople, gave the instruction: “If your body is not strong enough to continue fasting all day, no wise man will reprove you; for we serve a gentle and merciful Lord who expects nothing of us beyond our strength.” Pope Saint Leo I (461) pointed out that fasting is a means and not an end in itself; its purpose is to foster pure, holy, and spiritual activity. He coined the famous

phrase which a thousand Christian writers have to ceased to reiterate: "What we forego by fasting is to be given as alms to the poor."

It was not until the ninth century, however, that less rigid laws of fasting were introduced. It came about in 817 when the monks of the Benedictine order, who did much labor in the fields and on the farms, were allowed to take a little drink with a morsel of bread in the evening. This extremely light refreshment they took while they listened to the daily reading of the famous *Collationes* (collected instructions) written by Abbot Cassian in the fourth century. Our modern word collation, meaning a slight repast, comes from this.

Eventually the Church extended the new laws to the laity as well, and by the end of medieval times they had become universal practice; everybody ate a light evening meal in addition to the main meal at noon. The present custom of taking some breakfast on fasting days is of very recent origin (the beginning of the nineteenth century).

Abstinence from *lactinia* (milk foods), which included milk, butter, cheese, and eggs, was never strictly enforced in Britain, Ireland, and Scandinavia because of the lack of oil and other substitute foods in those countries. The Church using common sense granted many dispensations in this matter in all countries of Europe. People who did eat the milk foods would often, when they could afford it, give alms for the building of churches or other pious endeavors. (One of the steeples of the Cathedral of Rouen in France is still known for this reason as "butter tower.") In past centuries the Western Church increasingly allowed the consumption of *lactinia* until the new Code of Canon Law (1918) omitted them entirely from the list of abstinential foods.

**T**he fifth Sunday in Lent, called "Passion Sunday" (*Dominica Passionis*) since the ninth century, occurs two weeks before Easter and inaugurates Passiontide, the final and particularly solemn preparations for the great feast. As a liturgical season, Passiontide is older than Lent, having been established by the Church as

a period of fasting as early as the third century. During the first four weeks of Lent the spirit of personal penance prevailed, but these last fourteen days were devoted entirely to the meditation of Christ's Passion. Among the Slavic nations Passion Sunday is called "Silent Sunday" and "Quiet Sunday."

On the eve of Passion Sunday the crucifixes, statues, and pictures in the churches are draped in purple cloth as a sign of mourning. This custom originated in Rome, where in ancient times the images of the papal chapel in the Vatican used to be shrouded when the deacon sang the concluding words of the Sunday gospel, "Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple" (Jn 8:59). The liturgical services of Passiontide are based on what happened to our Lord during the last days before his death, leading up to the mysteries of the Passion. (Mystery, in this connection, is the religious term for any episode of Christ's life related in the Gospels.) The Mass texts are dominated by the thought of the Just One, persecuted by His enemies, as He approaches the supreme sacrifice of Golgotha.

**O**n Friday after Passion Sunday the Church celebrates the Feast of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin, commemorating events of pain and suffering in her life as recorded in the Gospels. The devotion to the sufferings of Mary was very popular and widely practiced in medieval times. In 1423, a synod at Cologne introduced a Mass text and prescribed a feast in honor of the Seven Sorrows to be annually held in western Germany. In 1727, Pope Benedict XIII (1730) extended this feast to the whole Church.

As sequence (hymn after the Gradual of the Mass) the Church employs the famous Latin poem *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, which originally was written as a prayer for private devotion by an unknown author (probably a Franciscan) in the thirteenth century. The *Stabat Mater* has been translated from the Latin into the vernacular among all Christian nations, and is a greatly cherished Lenten hymn everywhere. In Latin countries, especially in Spain and South America, the Feast of the Seven Sorrows is a great day of popular devotions. Thousands



