

Did you know . . .

How Long Is Lent?

If asked this question, we probably would all say that Lent is 40 days long, replicating Jesus Christ's sacrifice and withdrawal into the desert for 40 days. But some may say differently, due to a difference between Lent as a penitential season and Lent as a liturgical season.

Until recently, the liturgical season of Lent and the Lenten fast were the same in length, running from Ash Wednesday until Holy Saturday, when the Easter season began at the start of the Easter Vigil. When the rites of Holy Week were revised in 1956, however, liturgical emphasis was placed on the Triduum: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday.

In 1969, the Triduum was extended to include Easter Sunday as well. The General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar issued by the Sacred Congregation of Divine Worship defined the Easter Triduum as beginning with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper and closing with Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday.

Until 1969, the Triduum was considered part of the liturgical season of Lent. When the Triduum became its own liturgical season (the shortest in the liturgical year), the liturgical season of Lent was redefined. The General Norms put it, liturgically: Lent runs from Ash Wednesday until the Mass of the Lord's Supper exclusive. Thus Lent would be 43 days long (Ash Weds. to Holy or Spy Weds.) and if Holy Thursday is included (since Mass of the Lord's Supper doesn't begin until sundown) 44 days long. So a correct answer for the liturgical season of Lent can be either 43 or 44 days, but not the Lenten Fast.

The Lenten Fast has 40 days, corresponding to the 40 days that Christ spent in the desert fasting. From a very early period in the Church's history, a literal 40 days fasting has been seen as necessary by Christians. The Apostles instituted making it 40 days like Christ's fast. There were differences over time as to how the 40 days were to be observed: some churches did not fast on Saturdays, most not on Sundays. This made the Lenten fast shorter than 40 days, so they began Lent earlier to make up the deficiency.

St. Gregory the Great accepted 36 days as the Lenten fast at the close of the 6th century, counting the 6 weeks of Lent minus the Sundays. (Sundays of Lent being non-fasting as they are considered "Little Easters") But the Church of Rome insisted on 40 days, so the four days of Quinquagesima Week (Quinquagesima Sunday being the last Sunday before Lent) were added to Lenten Fast (Ash Weds. thru Saturday) which makes the 40 days of Lent.

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