



CATHOLIC CUSTOMS & TRADITIONS



LENT & EASTER





INTRODUCTION

*To change and to change for
the better are two different things.*

GERMAN PROVERB

The Church's liturgical seasons are a study in change, especially during Lent and Easter. In this booklet, we focus on the dramatic changes in the life of Jesus—and on Lent's insistent call to change our own lives. Jesus' encounters with darkness and evil, including his betrayal and arrest and his death on the cross, attest to the reality of suffering in life, accepting what we must, and changing what we can. His resurrection to new life, his ascension to the Father, and his sending of the Holy Spirit attest to God's ability to trump evil, to banish sin, and to triumph over death. Easter is our celebration after "changing for the better" during the forty long days

of Lent. The Holy Spirit is our gift, our light, our strength, and our advocate for the rest of the journey.

As Catholic Christians, the liturgical year is our compass, directing us toward ever-new experiences of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It invites us to glimpse mysteries of faith we may have previously overlooked. It teaches us to go deeper into God by reflecting often on the words and actions of Jesus. It reveals to us the flow of joy, sorrow, longing, hope, death, and resurrection in Jesus' life—and in every life.

Through this booklet we invite intergenerational learning groups, catechists, RCIA teams, confirmation candidates and sponsors, parish study groups, and all parishioners to let the liturgical year, especially Lent and Easter, change us for the better, every day, every week, every season.



Lent

The whole church goes on retreat for six weeks about a month and a half after the Christmas season. Lent prepares for Easter and new life. Three themes hold the six weeks together: (1) the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, (2) the implications of this mystery for those preparing for baptism, and (3) a spiritual renewal of faith and conversion on the part of those already baptized. These themes have not always received equal emphasis over the centuries. Preparation for baptism, the original heart of Lent, had almost disappeared until Vatican II's reforms.

Lent is closely associated with the transition from winter to spring. The word "lent," for example, comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for springtime, *lencten*. It describes the gradual lengthening of daylight after the winter solstice.

LENT AND BAPTISM

Lent evolved around the theme of baptism, which, from at least the 3rd century, had been associated with the vigil of the anniversary of the Lord's resurrection: the Easter Vigil. Preparation for baptism could last for several years. During this time the persons preparing were instructed, supported in their withdrawal from pagan practices and loyalties, and taught to live a new way. Finally, during what would become Lent, they received intense instruction, participated in special rituals, fasted on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and were baptized during the Easter Vigil.



When the Roman persecution of Christians ended in 313, the church began a public and more concise process, catechumenate (Greek *katechein*, “to proclaim,” “to teach”), of accepting new adult believers, catechumens, into membership. The catechumens’ final phase of preparation for baptism always included a period of fasting to support changes in lifestyle.

This ritual preparation for Easter was a special time at first only for catechumens. Gradually it became popular for those already baptized to participate in this tradition of fasting. When the catechumenate was discontinued in the early Middle Ages, due to the widespread custom of infant baptism, Christians continued the tradition of fasting for forty days in preparation for Easter.

PENITENTIAL THEME

In the 4th century, preparation for baptism was joined by fasting and other penitential practices before Easter in preparation for absolution from public sins and crimes. This practice spread among other parishioners and not just public sinners. During the Middle Ages, it became universally popular with emphasis on personal sin. This penitential and more somber theme of Lent gave rise to the liturgical penitential color purple and to the dropping of the joyful acclamations of Alleluia and Glory to God during this season. This penitential atmosphere of Lent was supported by other church disciplines such as the prohibition of weddings during these six weeks. To this day weddings are still discouraged because of the penitential atmosphere of the season.

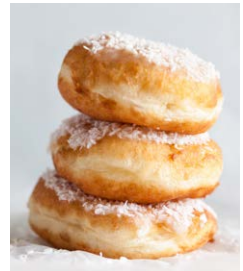
MARDI GRAS

Lent is immediately preceded by a celebration that has no mention on the calendar of the church year. The tradition of Mardi Gras (French, “fat Tuesday”) began as a pre-lenten day of feasting and carnival (Latin *carnelevarium*, “removal of meat”). It was a “last fling” in preparation for the severe fasting and abstinence that began the next day on Ash Wednesday. It made sense to eat what would otherwise spoil during the six weeks of Lent and to help other families to do the same with a party atmosphere.



PACZKI

In ethnic Polish areas the baking, selling, and eating of paczki (pronounced poneski) is popular the day before Ash Wednesday. These are heavy deep-fried pastries, sometimes filled with fruit.



SHROVE TUESDAY

The day before Ash Wednesday is also called Shrove Tuesday. This name (Middle English *shriven*, “confession”) comes from an old custom of going to confession in preparation for the holy season of Lent.



ASH WEDNESDAY

Ash Wednesday officially begins Lent. Ashes from burned palms saved from the previous year are placed on the forehead of parishioners. This custom of placing ashes on the heads of people and, originally, the wearing of sackcloth is an ancient penitential practice common among the Hebrew people (Jonah 3:5–9; Jeremiah 6:26, 25:34; Matthew 11:21). At first this ritual of ashes, along with its original scriptural meaning, was not directly connected with the beginning of Lent. As early as the 300s, it was adopted by local churches as part of their practice of temporarily excommunicating or expelling public sinners from the community. These people were guilty of public sins and scandals such as apostasy, heresy, murder, and adultery (“capital” sins).

By the 7th century, this custom had expanded in some churches into a public Ash Wednesday ritual. Sinners first confessed their sins privately. Then they were presented to the bishop and publicly enrolled in the ranks of penitents in preparation for absolution on Holy Thursday. After a laying on of hands and imposition of ashes, they were expelled from the congregation in imitation of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise, with the reminder that death is the punishment for sin. “Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). They lived apart from their families and from the rest of the parish for the forty days of Lent (thus our word “quarantine”). Dressed in sackcloth and ashes, they were identified as penitents in the congregation and sometimes on the steps of the church. Common penances required that these penitents abstain from meat, alcohol, bathing, haircuts, shaves, marriage relations, and business transactions. Depending on the diocese, some penances lasted for years and even a lifetime.

During the Middle Ages, emphasis was placed on personal rather than public sin. As a result, traditions of Ash Wednesday in a mitigated form were adopted by all adult members of the parish. In recent years an alternate formula for the imposition of ashes emphasizes a more positive aspect of Lent: “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel” (see Mark 1:15).

LENTEN ATMOSPHERE

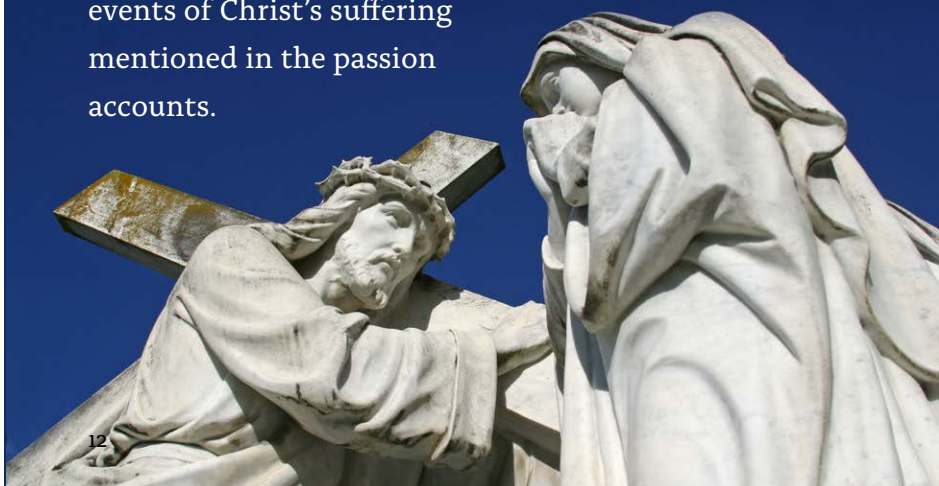
The atmosphere of Lent takes on a somber mood. In parish liturgies the joyous Alleluia and Glory to God are dropped. Starting on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, it is customary in many churches to veil prominent statues and crucifixes with a purple cloth as a sign of sadness and mourning, and as a fasting for the eyes to match that of the stomach.

FASTING AND ABSTINENCE

Fasting and abstinence are often linked together but are two different disciplines. Fasting has to do with the quantity of food eaten on particular days (little or none). Abstinence refers to the kind of food denied oneself, for example, meat. Fasting has always been a popular religious practice. Denying oneself a basic human need such as food for a period of time may be done for different reasons. It prepares for a feast. It promotes self-discipline. It supports one's prayers. It cleanses oneself of previous abuses and sin. All of these have been motives for the lenten tradition of fasting. Another motive has always been part of lenten fasting and abstinence: almsgiving, giving to the needy from what is saved through the discipline of fasting and abstinence, or from one's surplus.

STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Traditionally, lenten devotions in parish churches have drawn attention to the suffering and death of Jesus. The most popular one is known as the Stations of the Cross. During the time of the crusades (1095-1270), it became popular for pilgrims to the Holy Land to walk in the footsteps of Jesus to Calvary. In the next two centuries, after the Muslims recaptured the Holy Land, pilgrimages were too dangerous. A substitute pilgrimage, the Stations of the Cross, became a popular outdoor devotion throughout Europe. They represented critical events from Scripture or tradition of Jesus' journey to Calvary and varied in number from five to 20 until the 18th century when Pope Clement XII fixed the number at 14. In the mid-18th century, Stations were allowed inside churches and soon became a familiar feature. In the 1960s, it became popular to add a fifteenth Station representing the end of the journey: the resurrection. Some, including Pope John Paul II, have replaced traditional non-scriptural Stations with events of Christ's suffering mentioned in the passion accounts.



PRETZELS

Pretzels, a popular snack, had their origin in early Christian lenten practices. Because fat, eggs, and milk were forbidden during Lent, a special bread was made with dough consisting of only flour, salt, and water. These little breads were shaped in the form of arms crossed in prayer and were called *bracellae* (Latin, “little arms”). Among the Germans the Latin word became *bretzel*. These pretzels were a common lenten food throughout the Middle Ages in Europe and became an all-year-round snack, in its original shape, only in the 19th century.



HOT CROSS BUNS

Hot cross buns also became a popular food eaten during Lent. The custom began in England to bake buns, placing icing on them in the form of a cross, and eat them on Good Friday. Eventually, they were baked and eaten throughout Lent and even during the Easter season.



HOLY WEEK

Holy Week is the heart of the church year. Official church rituals and other traditions observed during this week remember and make present the passing of Jesus from life to death to new life and all of creation along with him.

THE PASCHA, OR PASSOVER

Originally the early church celebrated the *Pascha* as a single mystery. It included the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. There were no separate holy days devoted to the separate events that make up this mystery.

The words "Pascha," "Pasch," and "paschal" come from the Hebrew *pesach*, a "passing by" or a "passing through." This became the popular word "Passover." The greatest of all Christian feasts is most profoundly associated with the greatest of all Jewish feasts. The Israelites were saved from slavery when the angel of death struck the firstborn of the Egyptians but "passed over" the chosen people. The remembering of this saving act of God became the heart of the Hebrew religious experience.

It was during the annual Jewish Passover that Jesus "passed through" suffering and death into new life, a divine act that saved all of humanity and creation from final death.

ORIGINS

A distinct framework of Holy Week seems to have developed first of all in Jerusalem. When the Christian religion was legalized in 313, the baptized who lived in or near Jerusalem gathered publicly on the anniversary of the events at the places identified by tradition as “the holy places.” They relived the events with songs, readings from the story (the gospel passion narrative), procession, and vigils. In time, the universal church incorporated features of them into the official liturgies of what had become a “holy week.”



SACRED TRIDUUM

Originally, therefore, there was no Holy Week. The Pascha was celebrated in the context of a single day: the Easter Vigil. It began with sunset on the Sabbath evening and continued until dawn on the first day of the week or Sunday. By the 5th century, this paschal mystery had been broken down into its historical pieces, partly under the influence of borrowing from Jerusalem. The nucleus was called the Sacred Triduum (Latin, “three days”): Friday until Easter Sunday evening. It remembered the death, burial, and resurrection. Later, Holy Thursday was included because all days were reckoned from sunset to sunset.

PALM SUNDAY

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday. Parish liturgies begin with the blessing of palms somewhere outside of the usual assembly area, in imitation of the triumphant “parade” of Jesus from “Bethany” to “Jerusalem” (Matthew 21:1–11). The gospel of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem is read, followed by a procession into church, with people holding blessed palms and singing festive songs. Soon afterward, however, the theme of triumph changes radically with the reading of the passion narrative from the gospel of Matthew, Mark, or Luke (depending on what year of the liturgical cycle is being celebrated).

PALMS

Originally, people paraded or processed in the original footsteps of Jesus from the little village of Bethany into the city of Jerusalem. As part of the festivities they carried real palm fronds or olive branches, the two most common trees in Palestine (see Matthew 21:18). These were replaced with local versions of “palms” as the celebration of Palm Sunday spread throughout Europe and then the entire world: willow branches, cedar branches, pussy willows, and flowers. The “palm branches” commonly used in the United States are “ground palms” from Texas.

Blessed palms have always been respected as holy objects or sacramentals. Some families place one or more on the wall behind a crucifix or holy picture until the next Palm Sunday, or they might braid them into crosses for wall decorations. Others save them and burn a little when some crisis, such as a storm, threatens. This custom may have originated in Austria, Bavaria, and Slavic countries where it was common to scatter bits of blessed palms around on the farm to protect fields and animals against bad weather and diseases. Some of these traditions may very well be superstitious practices, presuming that there is special power in the plants themselves.



PREPARATION DAYS

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week are preparation days, both spiritually and physically, for the holy days to come later in the week. Traditions of receiving the sacrament of reconciliation (“confession”) during these days are reminiscent of ancient practices. During early centuries repentant sinners were absolved from their sins on Holy Thursday after six weeks or more of public penance. This day was chosen so that all could participate in the solemnities of the Holy Triduum and Easter.

EASTER DUTY

Reception of the Eucharist on the part of the laity became rare starting early in the Middle Ages. Feelings of personal unworthiness to receive Christ in communion resulted from an exaggerated emphasis on Christ’s divinity in relation to his humanness and sacramental presence. Communion eventually become so rare that the church began to mandate that it be received at least once a year on Easter Sunday (Council of the Lateran, 1215). This became known as the “Easter duty.” Time for one’s Easter duty was eventually extended to the period between the First Sunday of Lent and Trinity Sunday (first Sunday after Pentecost). This paschal precept remains in the Code of Canon Law (Canon 920): “Once admitted to the blessed

Eucharist, each of the faithful is obliged to receive holy Communion at least once a year...during Paschal Time.”

The presumption was that confession must be part of the Easter duty. The confession of grave sins remains the current law of the church (Canon 989): “All the faithful who have reached the age of discretion are bound to confess their grave sins at least once a year.”

HOLY THURSDAY

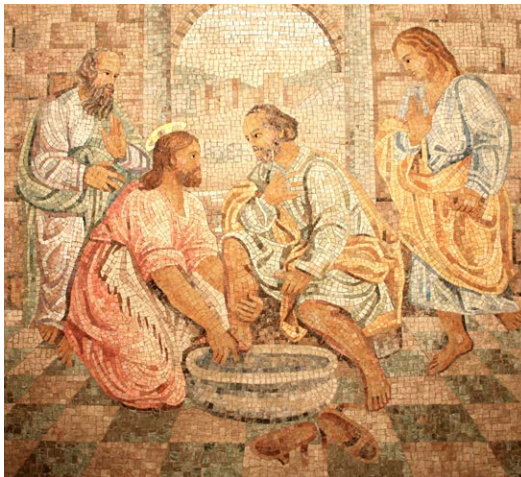
The Holy Thursday evening celebration of The Lord’s Supper begins the Sacred Triduum. The day is sometimes called Maundy Thursday, from the solemn ritual of washing of feet in imitation of Jesus at his Last Supper. The title is a corruption of *mandatum* (Latin, “commandment”) from the words of Jesus sung as the washing begins: “A new commandment I give you...”(John 13:34).

The observance of the Lord’s Supper in Jerusalem at the traditional place and approximate hour eventually



influenced the universal church to imitate the tradition. Remembering the institution of the Holy Eucharist takes place in the evening with joyful overtones. The Glory to God, not sung since Ash Wednesday, returns for this brief moment.

The tradition of avoiding the joyful sound of bells during the rest of the Triduum began in the 9th century in the Carolingian kingdom. It symbolized the humiliation and suffering of Jesus. In place of bells, wooden noisemakers called clappers were used.



WASHING OF FEET

The Holy Thursday ritual has included a ceremonial washing of feet by the presiding celebrant since the

5th century in some local churches, since the late 7th century in Spain and Gaul, and the 12th in Rome. This ritual imitates Jesus' Last Supper action of humility and service.

CHAPEL OF ADORATION

At the end of the Holy Thursday liturgy, consecrated communion bread is carried in procession with incense and song to a chapel of adoration. It will be received the next day in communion. After placing the consecrated bread in the tabernacle, an atmosphere of quiet waiting with the Lord begins. It is popular that parishioners spend a holy hour sometime before midnight in the adoration chapel.

STRIPPING THE ALTAR

The first hints of a new theme quickly become obvious: an anticipation of suffering and death. The altar table, symbolic of Christ, is stripped in silence. At times in the past, this action was considered symbolic of the stripping of Jesus before his crucifixion.

People begin leaving quietly for their homes. An atmosphere of sadness and reflection begins. Until recent times popular thinking considered these hours as a “wake” before the tomb, anticipating Good Friday. More properly, they are hours of “waiting” with Jesus as the saving events begin to unfold.

CHRISM MASS

Earlier in the day of Holy Thursday (and usually celebrated earlier in Holy Week, for practical reasons) the bishop, clergy, and parish delegations of the laity gather at the cathedral church. There, in solemn ritual, the holy oils used during the year in parishes throughout the diocese are consecrated. These are the oil of catechumens (pure olive oil used to anoint those preparing for baptism), oil of chrism (pure olive oil mixed with fragrant balm, used in baptism, confirmation, and ordination), oil of the sick (pure olive oil). Parish representatives carry these oils back home where they will be part of their parish's celebration of sacraments for the coming year, beginning with the Easter Vigil.

SEDER

The Seder is the sacred meal eaten by the Jews during the Passover and the meal from which ritual elements of the Mass were taken. The ritual is conducted by the father of the group. It features telling the original story of the Passover and the eating of these symbolic foods: matzoh (or unleavened bread), morar (bitter herbs representing the bitterness of slavery in Egypt), haroset (representing the brick mortar used by the enslaved Hebrews in building the Pharaoh's cities), parsley and boiled eggs (symbolic of springtime and new life), dipped into salt water (symbolic

of the tears of the Israelites). At the heart of the ritual is the blessing of unleavened bread and cups of wine and a repeated eating and drinking of these symbolic foods.

GOOD FRIDAY

The origin of the term “Good” in the title of this day is unknown, but probably emphasizes the saving value of the historical event of the crucifixion of Jesus. Another theory is that it is a corruption of “God’s” Friday. The theme of this day throughout history has been one of quiet sadness and mourning for the crucified and dead Jesus.

On this one day of the year the Mass is not celebrated. The absence of Mass respects the historical sacrificial action of Jesus on the cross. Consequently, the church emphasized a liturgy of the word with a reading of the passion narrative and psalms prophesying the suffering of Jesus.



VENERATION OF THE CROSS

Late in the 4th century, the veneration of the cross was introduced into Good Friday traditions in Jerusalem. Generations before, according to legends, Helen, the mother of the first Christian emperor, Constantine, discovered in the Jerusalem area the cross on which Jesus was crucified. It became an annual tradition at Jerusalem to offer the cross for the faithful to kiss and venerate. Later this custom, and fragments of the cross, relics, spread throughout the Roman Empire. The slow procession of people to kiss a cross held by ministers remains a dramatic feature of today's Good Friday services.

MASS OF THE PRE-SANCTIFIED

During the Middle Ages the simple communion service of the Good Friday liturgy evolved into the Mass of the Pre-Sanctified ("Mass" with hosts consecrated the day before). The ritual began to imitate a regular Mass without the Eucharistic Prayer. Early in its history the laity stopped receiving communion at this liturgy. The priest alone, therefore, received communion on Good Friday. In 1955, the traditional ritual was restored: the Liturgy of the Word, the veneration of the cross, and communion by the people.

FASTING

Good Friday fasting expressed personal penance and sadness over the death of Jesus. As early as the 2nd century, this tradition of fasting, sometimes from all food and drink, was observed for forty hours. It prepares for the Easter festivities and has always been a characteristic of Good Friday. In many places in the church this custom of fasting was very severe, more severe than official church discipline asked for. Remnants of this tradition are still evident. On this day, some families abstain not only from meat (the church discipline) but also from ordinary foods such as dairy products. Some customs—strange to the casual observer—still prevail on this day, for example, toast deliberately burned.

An atmosphere of quiet and even silence prevails in many families, with a curtailing of radio, television, and secular music. Until recent times almost all of secular culture respected the spirit of Good Friday. Most businesses and places of employment were closed from noon until 3 P.M. Today this custom is observed only in scattered places.



TRE ORE

Many parishioners still remember the *Tre Ore* (Italian, “three hours”) Good Friday services in their parish churches. This tradition incorporated the official Good Friday liturgy and expanded it to three hours, the amount of time Jesus spent on the cross. There were popular prayers and devotions such as the Stations of the Cross, rosary, and sermons on the last words of Jesus. These devotions remain popular in some parishes. This tradition began in Lima, Peru, in 1732. It spread to the other Latin American countries, and then to England, Italy, and the United States. It never became very popular in other countries.

The *Tre Ore* tradition is very mild compared to customs elsewhere. It was popular in some countries, especially in Latin America, to hold elaborate funeral processions on Good Friday, carrying a statue of the dead Jesus. These ended at “tombs,” often with the Blessed Sacrament present, where people came to visit as at a wake.

THE EASTER VIGIL

No other moment of the church year is as rich in powerful and early symbolism as the Easter Vigil. It is the night of all nights. It is the heart of Christianity. It is Easter!

The daytime hours of Holy Saturday, continuing the atmosphere of Good Friday, have been observed as a time of quiet and fasting from the earliest centuries. The day



had no liturgy or religious traditions of its own. There was an atmosphere of anticipation for the coming of night and for the celebration of the resurrection.

An annual celebration of the Lord's resurrection goes back to the first generation of Christianity. For the first three centuries this was the only feast observed throughout the church. This original celebration of what would become Easter was done by way of a vigil (Latin *vigilia*, "a watch," or "waiting"). It was natural that Christians chose the night hours to celebrate their religious experience of a Christ victorious over death and sin and their victory along with his. It was during those dark hours, turning into the first day of the week (Sunday), that this mystery had occurred (Matthew 28:11; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1).

With some modifications, especially in length, today's renewed ritual echoes that of early centuries. As soon as the evening star became visible, the night-long ritual began. The first hours were spent in Scripture readings and prayers. The readings from Scripture emphasized a prophetic theme of a new creation and salvation through water, such as the story of creation, the fall, the flood, the sacrifice of Isaac, the Passover, the crossing of the "Red Sea," and the entry into the Promised Land.

As the hours of the night unfolded, this theme was ritualized in a new creation through the waters of baptism, especially the baptism of adults. This ritual, which gave a distinct theme to the Easter Vigil, began with the solemn blessing of the Easter water, with a chanting of the Litany of Saints, by plunging the lit Easter Candle into the water, and by mixing it with holy oils. Then the catechumens who had been in preparation, sometimes for years, renounced Satan's influence on their former lives, confessed their faith, and were baptized, anointed, and dressed in white robes. By the 5th century, in the Roman church, a second anointing, or chrismation, was done by the bishop.

During the first centuries it was a tradition to give blessed milk and honey to those newly baptized. This gesture symbolized that the newly baptized were infants in the faith, called neophytes. It also symbolized their having just crossed over into the new Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. This practice, marking an

important moment in life, was borrowed from pagan mystery cults.

Finally, as the hours of vigil approached dawn, the newly baptized shared the Eucharist for the first time with the community of believers.

EASTER FIRE

The impressive blessing and lighting of the Easter fire, which still begins the vigil today, was not part of the ritual in ancient times. Among the Germanic people in pre-Christian times, bonfires in honor of pagan deities were popular to announce the beginning of spring and to assure good crops. After Christianity spread among



these people, the church forbade these spring bonfires as a pagan practice. During the 6th and 7th centuries, however,

Irish missionaries brought to the continent a tradition of blessing a bonfire outside of the church on Holy Saturday night. This tradition had been started by St. Patrick to counter the influence of spring bonfires among the Celtic Druids. The tradition became popular

in the Carolingian empire, spread to Rome, and eventually was incorporated into the liturgy of the Easter Vigil.

The lighting of a new Easter fire also had a practical purpose. The lamps in church used to be extinguished Holy Thursday night. Consequently, a new fire had to be lit for the celebrant and readers to see by.

EASTER CANDLE

The lighting of the Easter Candle seems to have originated in the ancient daily ritual of *Lucernare* (“lighting of the lamps”), as darkness fell. The tradition of lighting candles held by the people present began in Rome in the early centuries. There the dark of night at the Easter Vigil was filled with candles symbolic of the resurrected Christ.

A cross is cut or traced into it with the proclamation: “Christ yesterday and today; the Beginning and the End,” adding the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha and Omega. The numbers of the current year are added in the four angles of the crossbars with the proclamation: “All time belongs to him; and all the ages. To him be glory and power; through every age and for ever. Amen.” Four grains of incense, sealed with wax red nails, are inserted at the ends of the crossbars, and one is inserted where the crossbars meet with the words: “By his holy and glorious wounds, may Christ the Lord guard us and protect us. Amen.”

BLESSING OF EASTER BASKETS

Popular traditions on Holy Saturday are associated in some way with preparations for the festivities of Easter. On this day or during the days preceding, eggs are boiled and dyed, Easter clothes are purchased, and foods prepared. The blessing of special foods for Easter is still a popular tradition, especially among people of Polish ancestry. Baskets of food are brought to church where they are blessed by the pastor.



Easter

The theme of Easter morning echoes that of the Easter Vigil: Jesus is raised from the dead and is Lord. Those who believe and are baptized share in this resurrection to new life. This theme will continue for the next fifty days of the Easter season.

It was natural that the very first followers of Jesus would hold this moment sacred. It was the anniversary of that wonderful time when they experienced him risen and still among them. His death had occurred on the most important of all Jewish feasts: the Passover. His resurrection fulfilled all that the Passover had meant to them as Jews. It was an exodus, or passage, from the old times and the oppression of slavery to spiritual freedom. Jesus was the Paschal Lamb, slain to achieve this freedom.

DATE OF EASTER

Early in Christianity a controversy arose over setting the date of the annual Pascha. Some, called the *Quartodecimans* (Latin, “fourteenth”), claimed that it should be celebrated annually on the precise date of Jesus’ historical Passover: the 14th of Nisan (first day of the full moon that followed the spring equinox), usually a weekday. Others insisted that it always be a Sunday, because Christ was raised from the dead on the first day of the week. The decision was that it be observed on the Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox. (In the West, the Celtic church in Britain and Ireland refused to accept the date until 664 because of their own Celtic calendar.) Easter can occur on any Sunday from March 23 to April 25.

SUNRISE SERVICES

The Easter tradition of sunrise services was already popular in the Middle Ages. In churches these were usually in the form of early morning Mass. In many areas of Europe, however, there was dancing and singing at the first sign of the Easter dawn. These rituals were very possibly a continuation of New Year celebrations that coincided with the spring equinox among many peoples of Europe. They welcomed the new power of the sun and new life in creation.



Sunrise services are popular throughout the United States among Protestant and ecumenical groups. They began in the mid-1700s among members of the Moravian church in Pennsylvania. The famous sunrise service at the Hollywood Bowl began in 1921.

NEW EASTER CLOTHES

Wearing new Easter clothes may be traced to the new white robes in which the newly baptized at Easter were clothed. They are also symbolic of the newness of resurrection. This symbolism has been lost for most. The practice, still evident today, is probably associated more with the change of seasons along with a desire to look one's best at Easter church services—especially if it is a rare appearance! There is also a possibility that this wearing of new clothes may have originated in ancient times as part of New Year festivities originally held at the spring equinox.

EASTER PARADE

During the Middle Ages in Europe, people in their new Easter clothes would take a long walk after Easter Mass. This was a kind of procession preceded by a crucifix or the Easter Candle. This tradition was condemned by Protestant reformers. Even though its original meaning was lost, the tradition evolved into the Easter parade. It is still popular in many cities in the United States today, especially on Fifth Avenue in New York.

EASTER LAMB

The sacrificed lamb was the key symbol of the Passover Seder. It continued as a symbol of Jesus, the Lamb of God, slain and raised from the dead to gain freedom for all from the slavery of sin and spiritual ignorance. The Easter Lamb became an important symbol in Christian art. It also became popular to include the symbol among Easter decorations and to bake Easter breads and cakes in the shape of a lamb.



EASTER EGGS

The egg has become a popular Easter symbol. Creation myths of many ancient peoples center in a cosmogenic egg from which the universe is born. The egg, therefore, is a natural symbol, not only of creation, but also of re-creation and resurrection. In ancient Egypt and Persia friends exchanged decorated eggs at the spring equinox, the beginning of their new year. These eggs were a symbol of fertility for them because the coming forth of a live creature from an egg was so surprising to people of ancient times. Christians of the Near East adopted this tradition, and the Easter egg became a religious symbol. It represented the tomb from which Jesus came forth to new life. Because eggs were at one time forbidden by the church's lenten discipline of fasting and abstinence, they were a precious Easter food.

Easter eggs are usually given to children, either in Easter baskets or hidden for the children to find. Among the Slavic people these are called *pysanki* ("to design"). The custom of decorating trees outdoors with decorated, hollow

Easter eggs originated in Germany.



EASTER BUNNIES

Little children are usually told that the Easter eggs are brought by the Easter Bunny. Rabbits are part of pre-Christian fertility symbolism because of their reputation for reproducing rapidly. Their association with Easter eggs goes back several hundred years to vague legends in Germany. There the custom of making candy rabbits also originated. The Easter Bunny has never had a religious meaning.



EASTER LILIES

Easter lilies did not exist in North America until about 100 years ago. The white trumpet lily, which blooms naturally in springtime, was introduced here from Bermuda. The popular name “Easter lilies” comes from the fact that they bloom around Eastertime. They have become associated with Easter as much as poinsettias are with Christmas. In early Christian art the lily is a symbol of purity because of its delicacy of form and its whiteness. For the same reason it serves well as a symbol of resurrection.

MYSTAGOGIA

Easter does not end abruptly. It begins a season. Like all major feasts in the church year, it is celebrated with an octave, a week-long festival. During the early centuries, those who were baptized at the Easter Vigil would gather daily during Easter Week for further “instructions in the Christian mysteries,” called “mystagogia.” This mystagogia has been revived today in parishes. Once again, it is an important feature of the newly baptized adults’ journey of new faith continuing for the fifty days of Eastertime.

PENTECOST

The Easter season lasts for fifty days, ending with Pentecost (Greek *pentekoste*, “fiftieth”). Ranking second only to Easter, the feast of Pentecost must be understood in the context of the Jewish feast by the same name. Its other name in Jewish tradition is Feast of Weeks, a full season of seven weeks of thanksgiving beginning with Passover Sabbath (see Tobit 2:1; 2 Maccabees 12:32). This prolonged festival celebrated the theme of harvest and thanksgiving. It evolved before the time of Christ into a memorial of the covenant and, by 300 C.E., a memorial of the giving of the Law.

By the end of the 2nd century, Christians were observing a similar fifty-day festival of rejoicing after the annual Pascha.

By the late 4th century, the feast of the Ascension was celebrated in some parts of the church on the fortieth day after Easter (see Acts 1:3, 9–11). Originally, this mystery of the ending of Jesus' visible presence among his followers seems to have been observed as part of the outpouring of the Spirit on the fiftieth day, or Pentecost. In many dioceses in the United States, the Ascension has been moved to Sunday and replaces the seventh Sunday of Easter.

The weekdays between the Ascension and Pentecost are a preparation period for the outpouring of the



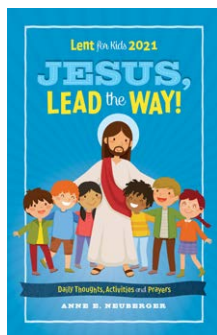
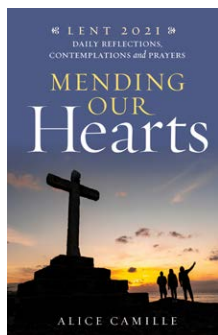
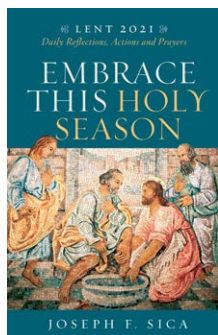
Spirit. It is popularly called the Pentecost Novena (see Acts 1:14).

Pentecost itself closes out the Easter season. It celebrates the overwhelming experience of God pouring out the Spirit upon the first community of those who believed Jesus was the Lord and Christ (see Acts 2:1–4). Pentecost is called, therefore, the birth of the church or the birth of the church’s mission.

The color of vestments and decorations for Pentecost is red. It symbolizes the intense love and fire of the Holy Spirit. Other symbols of the Pentecost event are the dove (see Luke 3:21–22), the tongues of flame (see Acts 2:1–4), and wind (see Acts 2:2).



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