

Forty Privileged Days

Of course, we are referring to Lent. Privileged, you say? You thought rather that they were to be endured and borne with a sigh.

But consider the profoundly wonderful gift that fasting is. Its power is almost incomprehensible. All the weapons of the world past and present do not equal one person's fasting from the heart for one day. That one privileged Lenten practice can move God's heart like no other. It can purify us, make us more apt for prayer, and strengthen our will power.

In Lent we let the pangs of hunger remind us of our hunger for God. Other practices to which we are called are prayer, abstinence from meat and almsgiving. In addition, very beneficial is a weekly holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament, taking time for personal prayer and spiritual reading and most especially making a good confession and receiving sacramental absolution

For the most part we do pray and abstain and give of ourselves to the poor, but fasting has almost disappeared in our Catholic practice and its lack is telling.

Lent has a very long history and is, in fact one of the oldest observations on the Christian calendar. Though it has changed over the years its purpose has always been the same: self-examination and penitence, demonstrated by self-denial, in preparation for Easter. In days of old forgiveness of serious sins was much harder than it is today. Christians who wanted to be accepted back into the community after serious sin became public penitents. They wore sackcloth and ashes and stayed at the doors of the church asking to be forgiven.

Pope St. Gregory is credited with the ceremony that gives the day its name. As those public penitents came to the church for forgiveness, Gregory marked their foreheads with ashes reminding them of the biblical symbol of repentance (sackcloth and ashes) and mortality: "You are dust, and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19).

Lent now and in the past also marks a drawing to a close of the Rite of Initiation for those who have been studying to become Catholics. They will be baptized, confirmed and receive their first Holy Communion during the Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday

So let us enter or continue in Lent with a generous resolution done out of love. Let us accept the challenge to offer God our fasting, perhaps on bread and water on Wednesdays and Fridays. Live it close to the heart of Jesus and for the souls he loves so much. Offer it too for our catechumens and candidates that at the Easter Vigil they may find a welcoming and loving community in our parishes. We just may find in ourselves a renewed faith and a banquet of joy.

"Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. If we have not all three together, we have nothing." *Perer Chrysolgous, 5th century.*