



INTRODUCTION

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

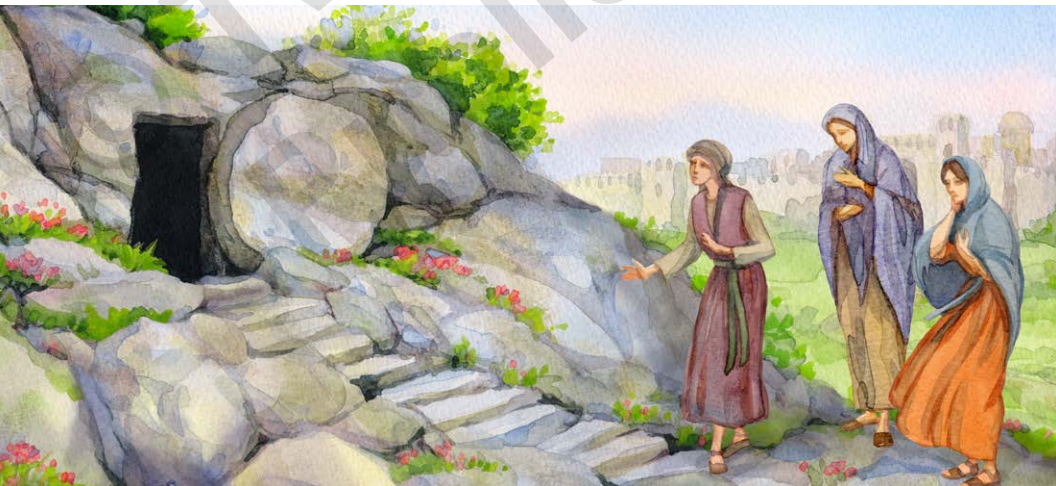
GERMAN PROVERB

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.

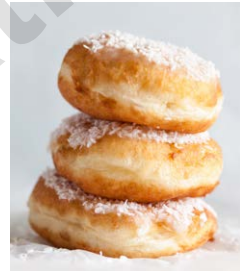
MARDI GRAS

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).

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.

