

## Lent beyond the ashes



By Patricia Davis  
NC News Service

Someone said that because of recent discoveries and because of the power of modern communications, 20th century Christians know more about the church of the first century than did the Christians of the second century.

Scholars have been learning more and more about how the first members of the church lived and thought. In recent decades, the church's roots have been closely scrutinized.

In light of that, as we begin another Lent, it is only natural to wonder how Christians in the first years after the death and resurrection of the Lord observed the season of Lent. The surprising answer is, they didn't.

The first Christians focused on the first day of the week, the Lord's day, for their celebration of God's victory over death. Each Sunday was — and is — a "little Easter."

Only later did a special annual celebration of Christ's passion, death and resurrection come to be observed.

As the number of believers grew, Easter became the logical date for their initiation into the community of the church.

To prepare those about to be baptized in the early church for this "most blessed of all nights," a period of fasting — originally just a couple of days or a week —

was observed. But by the fourth century the preparation time had been lengthened to 40 days. It later came to be known as Lent, a word meaning "spring."

Our time has seen the restored Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Now Lent is again experienced as the great retreat in the church, when Catholics can be with and support those who are preparing for baptism at Easter.

And we remember our own baptism.

The first word spoken to me when I am marked with ashes at the beginning of Lent sets the tone of the season. "Remember," the minister says, and the word echoes down the 40 days.

The Gospel for Ash Wednesday names the practices which mark all of Lent: prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

—*Prayer.* Matthew's Gospel reminds us that prayer's purpose is not applause. Rather, prayer is for the eyes of God "who sees what is hidden." Thus, each Christian can adapt time-tried Lenten disciplines to his or her own needs.

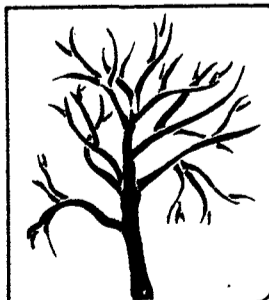
—*Fasting.* It is not that food is bad. It is that food is good — worth sharing, worth respecting. Beyond the fasting that the whole church does, I may also fast daily from junk food, join Bread for the World or Operation Rice Bowl and promote ways for the earth's food to be shared, and learn to substitute grains for meat.

—*Almsgiving.* The practice of providing for the needs of others can take so many forms. I can join my parish in its monthly staffing of a soup kitchen. I could write a long letter to a friend who needs to hear from me. Or, when the U.S. day for tax returns arrives April 15, I could view it as a time to rework my personal budget in light of gospel priorities.

All the personal and joint actions of Lent are ways of responding to the Ash Wednesday cry of the prophet Joel: "Return to me with your whole heart."

Each practice helps to prepare for the Easter exultation: "Rejoice, Jesus Christ...is risen!"

(Ms. Davis is on the staff of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Laity.)



# FOOD...

## ...for thought

How do people change? What is required if people are to grow or expand horizons, if they are to resolve conflicts or decide to take a better course in their lives?

The season of Lent has a way of raising such questions. Images of Lent point to a people on the move, people taking steps that will change their lives:

—There is the image of the Israelite people and how they moved out of slavery and toward the land promised them — a story repeated every year in the church on the eve of Easter.

—There is the Lenten image drawn from Christianity's early centuries, when those who intended to become members of the church took a series of final steps toward baptism on Easter.

Lent is a time when Christians ponder their own "pilgrimages." It is a time when Christians think about the fact that change — conversion, transformation, new life — is possible. They consider the ways personal life, relationships, communities, even a tension-filled world, can be renewed.

Pope John Paul II often talks about the potential for change. Often this comes up when he discusses peacemaking. Typically he analyzes both the obstacles to peace and the necessary ingredients of peace.

Undoubtedly a large percentage of the population would like to

undertake a peacemaking pilgrimage in some area of life.

"Peace has many different forms," the pope said this year. "There is peace between nations, peace in society, peace between citizens, peace between religious communities, peace within undertakings, neighborhoods, villages and, especially, peace inside families."

But fatalism is an obstacle to peacemaking. Discouragement is an obstacle.

Courage, the pope said, is a necessary ingredient of peacemaking. Among other ingredients of a peacemaking pilgrimage is the willingness to believe that peace is possible, he often says.

Justice, respect for the rights of others, dialogue and love promote peace, he believes.

But to be peacemakers, people need to change — to be transformed. What is needed, says the pope, is a "new heart."

The list of ingredients for a peacemaking pilgrimage — or for making any worthwhile improvement in life — could grow very long. Patience, hard work and prayer might be included. True understanding of the situation in need of change might be mentioned.

How do people expand horizons, resolve conflicts and grow? It is a matter to ponder during Lent.

## ...for discussion

1. There are many ways in which people can be on pilgrimage — on the move within their lives and directing their energies toward worthwhile goals. For many people the pilgrimage might entail growth, transformation, conversion. What makes these pilgrimages difficult? What attitudes help move these pilgrimages forward?

2. What role can other people play as you pursue a worthwhile goal in life?

3. How do you see the meaning of Lent?

4. Almsgiving — providing for others' needs — is a traditional Lenten practice. How many ways can you think of in which almsgiving in the broadest sense of the term can be practiced during Lent?

## SECOND HELPINGS

"The New Testament as Personal Reading," edited by Ronan Drury. The short, reflective chapters in this book take the reader on a personal journey with Scripture. One writer, Sean Freyne, speaks here of Mark's Gospel. It presents "real life people, capable of engaging us, the readers, in their tensions and struggles, yet also challenging us to see things differently," he states. Another writer, Sister Josephine Newman, speaks of the journey of growth in life that a Christian takes. God's mystery, "imprinted in the human heart, is encountered in and through the journey of one's self as it struggles to awaken and respond to the call of that presence within," she writes. The articles in this book appeared first in *The Furrow*, an Irish journal. (Templegate Publishers, 302 E. Adams St., Springfield, Ill. 62705. 1983. \$6.95.)

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But to be truly one with Christ, people must follow along the same path he did. And during Lent people can look for the occasions when they gain some understanding of what dying and receiving new life might mean.

Most people have some experience of failure, for instance. Or they go through a period when they are depressed and not feeling good about themselves. No matter how hard they try, they can't shake this feeling of failure or of being depressed.

Then later, after they become more hopeful about themselves once again, they may feel it took some activity on God's part to pull them out of it. They may realize a little better what Ezekiel was talking about in his wonderful and hopeful vision.

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