

# Do you know when Lent ends?

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

This week's column is about Lent. For those who may be tempted to skip to another part of the paper because you think you already know everything there is to know about Lent, let me pose a sample test question: If Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, when does it end?

If you answered Easter Sunday, you're wrong. Holy Saturday? Wrong again. Good Friday? Sorry.

According to the General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar, "Lent runs from Ash Wednesday until the Mass of the Lord's Supper exclusive" (n.28). The Mass of the Lord's Supper is celebrated on Holy Thursday evening.

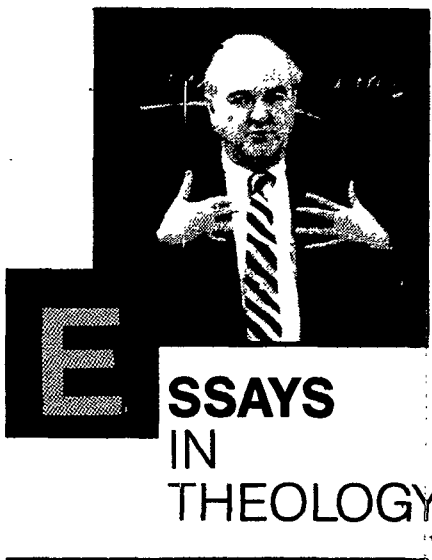
What else is there about Lent that we might not be aware of?

• Lent is a season of penance, but not penance for penance's sake.

In the years before the Second Vatican Council, Lent was regarded almost exclusively as a time of self-denial: Giving up candy and deserts, movies, favorite radio or television programs; or going to church more often, especially for daily Mass and weekly Stations of the Cross.

A penitential aspect to Lent still remains, but it's not simply to make us feel pain, on the assumption that if it doesn't hurt, there's no merit in it.

And neither is penance for our



own spiritual welfare alone. "During Lent penance should be not only inward and individual, but also outward and social" (Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n.110).

• Lent's penitential aspect is oriented towards baptism and Easter, more specifically towards the baptism of new Christians at the Easter Vigil liturgy.

The General Norms again: "Lent is a preparation for the celebration of Easter. For the Lenten liturgy disposes both catechumens and the faithful to celebrate the paschal mystery: catechumens, through the several stages of Christian initiation; the faithful, through reminders of their own baptism and through pen-

itential practices" (n.27).

The council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy had made the same point (n.109).

As we watch others being baptized or preparing for baptism at Easter, we are to recall our own baptismal commitment and should be led to acknowledge how often we have failed to measure up to that commitment.

Lent offers us an opportunity to come to terms with those failures and to recommit ourselves to the Christian life. This is done through a threefold penitential program of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Lenten prayer should have something of Jesus' desert experience to it, since Lent is a time for stepping back from our normal routine in order to take stock of our lives.

If this is the "inward and individual" aspect of Lenten spirituality, the fasting and the almsgiving are meant to be "outward and social." We fast not for our own spiritual good alone, and certainly not just to lose weight, but for the good of others. Fasting and almsgiving are fundamentally linked.

And we have Pope Leo the Great's challenging principle to guide us: "Let your fasting become the banquet of the poor."

Thus, if children are encouraged to give up candy and other treats paid for out of their own allowance, they should also be encouraged to give the money saved to the poor. It

shouldn't just go into the piggy-bank to buy something even better for themselves after Easter.

If they have given up watching television for an hour, they should use the time in service of others — perhaps reading to a younger sister or brother — and not simply to do something else they regard as fun.

Adults, too, have to make trade-offs — and to avoid self-serving ones. Some may recall, for example, how the spiritual point of the old Friday abstinence was subverted by Catholics who would have lobster for dinner instead of steak (if they could afford either).

• The other-oriented penitential fasting of Lent gives way to the paschal fasting of the Triduum.

The fasting that continues on Good Friday (mandated by church law) and Holy Saturday (recommended but not mandated) is of a different kind from the Lenten fast.

The Lenten fast is penitential; the paschal fast is anticipatory.

I asked a friend of mine — a highly experienced director of religious education and liturgy — how she explains the paschal fast. She put it this way: If you're invited out to dinner at the finest restaurant in the area, you eat less for a couple of days beforehand so you can fully enjoy the meal without worrying about breaking your diet.

That made sense to me. I hope it does to you.

And I hope Lent does, too.

# God provides all with a second chance

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 13:1-9; (R1) Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15; (R2) 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote: "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."

Israel's greatest prophet received his vocation from God in a bush — not in a cedar tree, but in a lowly, commonplace bush. He received it while engaged in his work, for God often meets man when he is doing his work.

Moses was intrigued in that the bush was burning, but it was not being consumed. The bush symbolized Israel; the fire, God's presence in her midst and her persecution in Egypt. Dramatically, God was telling Moses that the persecution of fire would not destroy His people because He was with them.

As Moses approached the bush, he was told to take off his shoes. The familiarity of the Garden of Eden was gone. Familiarity gave

way to profound reverence for God — a key concept of the Old Testament.

Thus the Hebrews, out of reverence, would not pronounce the name for God. In Hebrew, God's name was an unpronounceable combination of four consonants: YHWH (called the tetragrammaton). Since the word was not to be pronounced, the Hebrews substituted the word for "Lord," namely, Adonai. Later still, the vowels of Adonai were inserted into the four consonants YHWH to coin the word Yahweh or Jehovah.

The root of YHWH is the verb "to be" — "I am." Thus God gave Moses as His name, "I am who I am." "I am," that is, I exist, whereas the gods of pagans do not exist. "I am," that is, I am the Being par excellence — hence all-perfect, for imperfection is a lack of being. "I am," that is, I am the One co-existent with all times and persons, for "I am" is the present tense of the verb "to be."

I have no past, no future; I just am, present to all times and person, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, just as the center of a circle can touch every

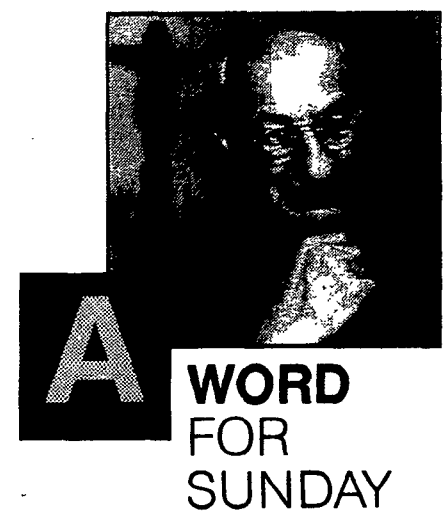
point on the circumference.

When John wanted to bring out Jesus' divinity, He used the seven great "I am's" in his Gospel: "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the good shepherd," and so on. When Jews asked Jesus, "How could He have seen Abraham," Jesus answered, "Before Abraham came to be, I am." And the Jews picked up stones to throw at Him, for He had identified himself with God (Jn. 8:57; 10:31).

God entrusted Moses with a mission: He saves man through man. As always in His dealings with man, God revealed only one part of Moses' mission — to free His people. By so doing, God prevented discouragement on Moses' part one step at a time. If one accepts his vocation, God will never fail one, provided he takes the first step and a step at a time.

In the Gospel, the fig tree — like the bush — symbolizes God's people: you and me. Jesus is the vine dresser, and the owner who planted the fig tree is God the Father. In justice, God the Father orders the fruitless fig tree to be cut down.

But Jesus, like a new



Moses, intercedes for us and by his death and resurrection frees us from sin's fruitless life. And the Father, because He is who He is — One who never ceases to love us, One who is always "kind and merciful," One who has compassion for those caught in the slavery of sin — gives in to His Son and offers all mankind a second chance.

This chance allows us to bring forth the fruit of good works.

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