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Lent Supplement

The Catholic Courier's special Lent supplement starts after PAGE 8

Lent 40 days

Season finds roots in history of penitence and preparation

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As Father Bampton's words remind us, Lent is a time of penance for sins and preparation for Easter.

The name of this 40-day season itself stirs thoughts of such preparation; "Lent" derives from the Anglo-Saxon word "lencten," meaning spring. And just as the earth prepares in the late winter months to celebrate spring's bloom, the church readies each Lent to celebrate the proclamation of its most essential mystery of faith — the death and resurrection of Christ.

Such a season has marked the church's liturgical years from its first centuries. The earliest Christians kept a strict two-day fast from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, often not eating or drinking at all during that period, according to Francis X. Weiser's book "Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs: The Year of the Lord in Liturgy and Folklore."

Eventually, Weiser wrote, longer periods of fasting before Easter came into practice throughout the church, culminating with many churches' adop-

tion in the third and fourth centuries of a 40-day fast. In the fifth century, Pope Gregory proclaimed that the faithful must abstain during Lent from meat and all things that came from the flesh: milk, cheese, eggs and butter.

According to several sources, the number of Lenten days — 40 — is based on the number of days Jesus fasted in the desert before beginning His public ministry. By the fourth century, this number was adopted by most Christians as the proper number of Lenten days. Indeed, after traveling throughout most of the Roman Empire, Saint Athanasius, patriarch of Alexandria, wrote in 339 A.D. that "the whole world" fasted 40 days, Weiser's book recorded.

The nature of the Lenten fast has changed throughout the centuries. Its earliest form consisted of abstaining from all food and drink, save a little water, until early evening. By the eighth century, most Christians began taking their single daily meal at 3 p.m., and the mealtime moved to noon throughout most of Christendom by the 14th century, Weiser wrote.

By the end of the Middle Ages, clergy, religious and laity began eating a

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Lent is the time to rise from sleep, from the lethargy of religious apathy, the time to wake up, to pull ourselves together, for there is much to be done, and if anything is ever to be done, now is the time to be up and doing.

From "Christ in the Lenten Gospels" by Father Bampton, SJ.

