

Lent meaningless apart from Easter

Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The word Lent is derived from an old English word meaning "spring-time." The Latin adverb *lente* means "slowly." On the basis of etymology alone, Lent signals the onset of spring and invites us to slow down our pace, to gather our thoughts, as it were, to take stock of our lives, to begin once again to put things in their proper perspective.

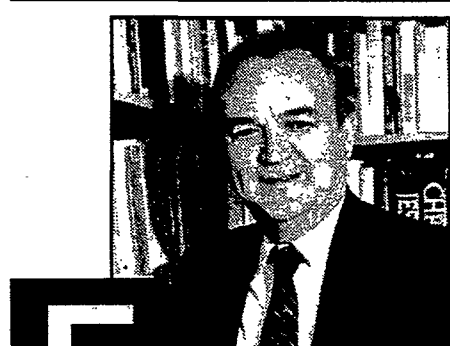
But Lent means more than the coming of spring (in the Southern Hemisphere, after all, it's fall, not spring, that approaches) or a slowing down of one's pace in life.

The season of Lent is inextricably linked with the celebration of Easter. Apart from Easter, Lent is meaningless.

During the first three centuries, most Christians prepared for Easter by fasting for only two or three days, although in some places the Easter fast was extended to the entire week before Easter (now known as Holy Week).

In Rome it is likely that the Easter fast originally lasted three weeks. By the fourth century, however, it had increased to 40 days, as we have it today, to correspond with the length of Jesus' fast in the desert (Luke 4:1-13).

The Roman Lent in its earlier three-week form was connected with the pastoral and liturgical preparation of catechumens for baptism at the East-



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er Vigil. And that is still the case today for the universal church.

Although everyone acknowledges that Easter is the most important, indeed the central, feast of the church's year, the time for the celebration of Easter was the source of much-heated debate in the early church.

Unlike today, there were many different calendars in use in the first Christian centuries: solar, lunar, Jewish, Babylonian, and so forth. And there were also different methods of computing the day on which Easter was to be observed.

Those who followed the Jewish calendar celebrated Easter on the date of Passover, namely, the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan. These

Christians, found especially in Asia Minor, were called Quartodecimans, which in Latin means "fourteenth."

Others celebrated Easter on the Sunday following Passover, in accordance with the practice in Rome.

Pope Victor I (189-98), one of the early church's most forceful popes, convened synods of bishops in Rome and at other Christian centers from Gaul (present-day France) to Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) in order to make the case for the Roman practice.

But when the churches of Asia Minor refused to abandon the Quartodeciman custom of observing Easter on Passover, Victor threatened to excommunicate them.

Here again church history provides a lesson for us today. Popes don't always act responsibly or prudently. Sometimes they overreach their authority.

In this instance, Pope Victor clearly did overreach. Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the greatest bishops and theologians of the time (indeed, of all time), sharply rebuked the pope, reminding him that previous popes down to Pope Soter (d. about 174) had been indulgent toward the Quartodecimans.

There was no talk then of Bishop Irenaeus's violating his "ministry of unity." No one accused him of pope-bashing or of disloyalty to the church.

It was considered to be clearly within the limits of acceptable episcopal

practice for one bishop to offer fraternal correction to another, even if that other happened to be the bishop of Rome.

In any case, the dispute was not officially settled until more than 100 years later. The Council of Nicea (325) endorsed the Sunday celebration. The Quartodeciman practice, however, continued for at least another century.

What the history of this controversy teaches us is that Lent and Easter are also on a very long list of items related to Catholic faith and practice that have been, and remain, subject to great variation and change. Only those Catholics lacking a sense of history could claim to be surprised or shocked by this.

Can we imagine, therefore, our Catholic life without a 40-day season of Lent? Of course we can, because that was, in fact, the case for the first 300 years or so of the church's history.

Does that mean there is no longer any point or purpose to Lent? Of course not, because the church evolves through history, responding to new needs and to new circumstances. Such has always been the case, and such will it always be until the end of time. It is an insight worth pondering this Lent, as we "slow down," welcome spring, renew our baptismal commitment, and prepare for the great feast of the Resurrection.

Temptations are as old as human race

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

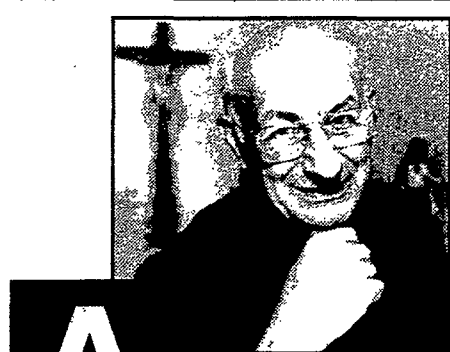
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 4:1-13; (R1) Deuteronomy 26:4-10; (2) Romans 10:8-13.

In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vatican II says: "The Lenten season has a twofold character: (1) it recalls baptism and prepares for it; and (2) it stresses a penitential spirit" (#109).

The first readings of the Sundays of Lent present the covenants of the Old Testament, helping us to understand what God does for us in baptism, effected by the death and resurrection of Jesus. The first reading of the first Sunday of Lent recalls the ancient Creed of Israel; the second and third Sundays recall the covenants with Abraham and Moses; the fourth, the first Passover in the Promised Land; and the fifth, God's promise to renew His people.

The second readings harmonize with either the first reading or the Gospel passages.

The Gospel readings for the first two Sundays of Lent recount Jesus' temptation and the transfiguration. The remaining three Sundays deal with faith and baptism: the call to repent or perish (third Sunday), the



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prodigal son (fourth Sunday), and the adulterous woman (fifth Sunday).

Lent lasts from Ash Wednesday (March 1) to the Chrism Mass of Holy Thursday (April 13). The Lenten Sundays number five. The sixth Sunday, Palm Sunday, begins Holy Week.

Next Sunday's first reading concerns the harvest feast in the Old Testament. What is emphasized is not so much the harvest offering as the confession of faith accompanying it. This confession of faith is one of the oldest in the Old Testament and is as basic to

it as the death and resurrection of Jesus are in the New Testament.

The second reading gives the Christian confession of faith: Jesus is Lord; raised by God from the dead.

The Gospel gives the threefold confession of Jesus made in reply to the triple temptations of the devil:

"Not by bread alone shall man live."
"You shall do homage to the Lord your God;

him alone shall you adore."
"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."

This threefold confession plots the future course of Jesus' ministry, culminating in His confession before Pontius Pilate (1 Timothy 6:13). This confession, focused on the will of God, characterized His whole ministry and finally brought Him to the cross.

The Responsorial Psalm (91) is the one quoted by the devil in the third temptation. The devil misapplied the promise of angelic assistance. The response puts the promise into proper focus: only those who cling to the Lord will be victorious over temptation, as was Jesus.

The temptations that assail us are as old as the human race. Like the devil, we are tempted to say, "If you are really God, how come you don't change stones into bread for those who pray

to you and serve you? How come the wicked often prosper and the good suffer? What profit is it for us to be good?" Jesus says, "Not on bread alone does man live."

Well, maybe so. Then a second temptation arises: "Ought we to rely so much on God? Perhaps we ought to go to politics, to the kingdoms of this world — to depend solely on our own human resources. God helps those who help themselves. Maybe secular humanism is the answer; namely, that this world is everything and man is god. If we fall down and worship these things, won't all good things come to us?" Jesus says, "The Lord your God alone shall you adore."

Finally, a third temptation: "Ought not God give us some sign that it is worthwhile to serve Him. What's the harm in a sign? Why are you so silent at Mass and in the Blessed Sacrament?" Jesus says, "Don't put the Lord your God to the test."

So you see, like the devil, we too can tempt God; we too can ask, "If you are the Son of God ..." The good news is that we can resist these temptations, as Jesus did, by going to the Scriptures. And as St. Paul advised by going to God himself: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (R2).

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