

COLUMNISTS

Lent is a time for commitment to community

The word "Lent" conveys different meanings to different people. For many traditional Christians it evokes ideas of penance, self-denial and fasting. For others, it brings to mind the catechumenate, baptism and Easter. For still others, it elicits thoughts of the coming springtime.

The first is the older view of the season, common among Catholics before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). For them, Lent was — and remains — primarily, even exclusively, a time for giving things up: candy, movies, cigarettes and cigars, for example.

The second is the newer, post-Vatican II view of the season. Catechumens prepare for baptism and their full initiation into the church. All current members of the church prepare for the renewal of their own baptismal vows at the Easter Vigil and for the annual celebration of the greatest of Christian feasts.

The third — Lent as the herald of springtime — is the neutral or secular view of the season. Indeed, in older English "lent" simply meant spring.

There is an historical reason why many people continue to think of Lent in terms of penance, self-denial and fasting, while the church thinks of it once again as a preparation for baptism and Easter.

In the first years of the church's existence, all members were converts and most baptisms were adult baptisms. This situation continued through the earliest



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

centuries of the Christian era.

During the first three centuries, most Christians prepared for Easter by fasting for only two or three days. In some places, the fast was extended to the entire week before Easter (now known as Holy Week). In Rome the fast may have even lasted three weeks. By the fourth century, however, this pre-Easter fast developed into our now-established Lent of 40 days.

But recent historical research has shown that the development of Lent was also influenced by a different 40-day fasting tradition — an ascetical one, popular among monks, based on the imitation of the life of Jesus, particularly his 40 days in the desert. This ascetical fast began immediately after the feast of the Epiphany in early January.

Why did this second, ascetical tradition of lenten fasting supplant the older tradition linked with the preparation for

baptism and Easter?

Beginning in the fifth and sixth centuries, as the number of adult baptisms sharply declined in relation to the baptism of infants, the need to prepare adult men and women for baptism at the Easter Vigil receded. The name "catechumen" lost its significance, and by the Middle Ages the catechumenate, for all practical purposes, no longer existed.

Then, with the Second Vatican Council, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) was renewed and focus was placed once again on the baptism of adults. Lent reclaimed its original purpose as a season of preparation for baptism and Easter.

Who, then, is right? Those who, in the name of tradition, continue to regard Lent as a time primarily of penance, self-denial and fasting? Or those who, also in the name of tradition, regard Lent as a time of preparation for baptism and Easter?

Obviously, the latter are right about the original meaning and purpose of Lent. Their view faithfully reflects the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

One need not conclude, however, that the first approach is entirely wrong. Indeed, the period of preparation for baptism and Easter has always included fasting and penance, as well as almsgiving. During Lent the catechumen and the mature member of the church alike are

expected to confront their own sinfulness and to deal honestly and resolutely with their spiritual weaknesses. Otherwise they will not be ready to renounce Satan and to commit themselves anew to the following of Christ at the Easter Vigil.

But the baptismal and Easter motifs are the lenten season's governing spiritual forces. Because that is the case, Lent can no longer be regarded primarily as a time for an individual to get his or her relationship with God in proper order through a rigorously ascetical program.

Rather, Lent is a season for becoming more deeply incorporated into the community of faith, for taking greater responsibility for the spiritual journeys of those preparing for entrance into the church, and for recommitting oneself to the abiding mission of the church, which includes outreach to the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the neglected, the battered, the bereaved, the lonely, the sick, the disabled — indeed to all those in need of the justice, the compassion and the mercy of Christ.

Of course, there will be some who will remain content to identify Lent with the coming of spring.

That's not necessarily a misguided sentiment. Unless one happens to live in Australia.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

- FRIDAYS of LENT at 7:30pm -

Saint Anne Church
1600 Mt. Hope Avenue
Rochester, NY 14620-4598

Brink Bush, organist
Lorne Altman, cantor

Organ Prelude: *Erbarm dich mein* (Bach)

Stations of the Cross with the *Stabat Mater*

Benediction of Blessed Sacrament with *O Salutaris Hostia* & *Tantum Ergo*

Organ Postlude: *Passion Choral* (Bach)

Upcoming Supplements

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(Bonus distribution to high school juniors & seniors)

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