

LENT AND EASTER OVERVIEW OF THE SEASON

*"Behold, now is a very acceptable time;
behold, now is the day of salvation."
(2 Corinthians 6:2)*

Lent, like many other practices and observances in the life of the church, had a gradual development. Its beginnings grew out of the desire to prepare appropriately for the central Christian feast of Easter. Christians reflected on the 40 days of fasting undertaken by Moses (Exodus 34:28), Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), and Jesus (Mark 4:2; Luke 4:1-2) as times of preparation for momentous events. It was only natural that they wished to imitate the example of these great Scriptural figures as part of their preparation for celebrating the saving passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord. The first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, in the year 325 A.D., already speaks of a 40-day period of preparation for Easter as something obvious and familiar to all.

Other influences entered into the development of the Lenten season. Among these were the reconciliation of penitents and the bringing of candidates for the sacraments of initiation during the Easter Vigil. Both of these represented a response to the basic summons enunciated in the Gospel of Mark: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (1:15). What the church required of candidates and penitents by way of liturgical and ascetical effort came to be assumed by the faithful out of a sense of solidarity with those embracing life in Christ and out of a need for renewal of personal spiritual life.

Pope Benedict XVI opens his message for Lent 2010 with these words: "Each year, on the occasion of Lent, the church invites us to a sincere review of our life in light of the teachings of the Gospel. This year, I would like to offer you some reflections on the great theme of justice, beginning from the Pauline affirmation: 'The justice of God has been manifested through faith in Jesus Christ.' The Holy Father goes on to define justice and to locate the origin of injustice in the human heart seduced by selfishness, sin, and a false self-reliance.

"The justice of Christ," he says, ". . . is the justice that comes from grace where it is not the human person who makes amends, heals himself and others." Expiation is "the loving act of God who opens himself in the extreme, even to the point of bearing in himself the 'curse' due to man so as to give in return the 'blessing' due to God." Christians recognize that we have received, in Christ, more than could ever be expected or hoped for, and are moved to "contribute to creating just societies, where all receive what is necessary to live according to the dignity proper to the human person and where justice is enlivened by love."

The Paschal Triduum, at the end of Lent, celebrates the justice that comes from God alone, "the fullness of charity, gift, salvation."