

St Nersess Seminary Press Release
March 07, 2006

Frequently-Asked Questions about Great Lent

by V. Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan

WHEN DID LENT ORIGINATE?

The earliest potential reference to Great Lent is in Canon 5 of the Council of Nicea (325 AD). The Greek phrase, *pros tessarakostys* which means “before the fortieth.” This could refer to Easter as the summit of a forty-day fast, or, equally possibly, to the Ascension, the fortieth day after Easter.

The first indisputable reference to Great Lent is from St. Athanasius, the great theologian-bishop of Alexandria (died 373 AD). In one of his “festal letters,” which announced the date of Easter each year to all the churches of the world, he speaks of a 40-day Fast beginning the sixth week before Easter and including “Holy Week,” which he called “Holy Paschal Week.” This is a week of more intensive fasting, vigils, etc., in preparation for Pascha.

By 340 AD Lent is universal. By 384 AD, we have clear evidence that Lent is fully developed in Jerusalem, with a cycle of liturgical services. This evidence comes to us from the diary of the Spanish nun Egeria, who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 384 and took copious notes about what she saw, especially the liturgical life.

HOW DID LENT ORIGINATE?

There are two theories on the Origin of Lent:

1. Lent was originally a 40-day Post-Epiphany Fast modeled after Christ’s journey into the desert following his baptism. These forty days gradually became joined to Pascha. There is some evidence for this connection of Lent to Epiphany in Egypt. Recently, however, liturgical scholars have cast doubt on this theory.
2. The scholarly consensus favors the theory that Lent developed from a 40-day catechumenate in preparation for baptism on Pascha. The North-African theologian Tertullian (c. 225 AD) refers to vigils and fasts in preparation for Paschal baptism. (See Romans 6, which envisions baptism as dying and rising with Christ. Throughout the Christian world, Easter became the preferred time to conduct baptism.) Gradually this developed into a formalized period of catechetical instruction for candidates for baptism. In time, baptized members of the church also participated in this pre-baptismal instruction.

The Armenian Church has an ancient service conducted on Holy Thursday called the “Absolution (or Dismissal) or the Penitents.” It is a long ceremony of scripture readings, hymns, and beautiful prayers of forgiveness. This service may well have its roots in the early centuries of the Church, when the faithful joined the catechumens in a ceremony of confession and absolution in preparation for Easter. Only the Latin rite has an analogous service on Holy Thursday.

Lent probably developed from a fusion of the 40-day catechumenate with the fast that preceded Pascha. This fast preceding Easter was originally one day (Saturday), but it soon developed into two and then three days.

The Council of Laodacea (mid-4th C.) provides the first legislation regarding the Catechumenate period. There can be no matrimony, no martyrs’ commemorations during Lent (Except Saturday and Sunday) There is fasting every day.

ARE THERE EXACTLY FORTY DAYS IN GREAT LENT?

The names for Lent in Latin, Greek, Armenian and other ancient languages all somehow convey the idea of “forty.”

Latin= *Quadragesima*

Greek = *Tessarakosta*
Armenian = *Karasnork*

But the idea that Great Lent should have *exactly* 40 days, no more, no less, is a later, medieval notion. In the Bible as in the Early Church, the number “forty” had theological, not mathematical significance. Forty is a number that implies completeness, fullness, the total time necessary to complete a given mission fully and completely. When the Evangelist states that Jesus spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert, he doesn’t mean to stipulate how many times the sun rose and set. He is implying, according to the religious-literary conventions of his time, that Jesus spent a good period of time in the desert, enough to accomplish that which was required of him by God. The same can be said for Noah in his ark, Moses on Mount Sinai, and the Jews in the wilderness.

Throughout the Christian world (which includes Armenia, of course), the exact number of days in Lent differed greatly from place to place and century to century, even if the name for “Lent” in many ancient languages implies “forty.” It was only later that the churches began to make adjustments to their liturgical calendars in order to ensure that the fasting period consisted of exactly forty days.

WHAT ARE SOME OTHER ARMENIAN WORDS FOR GREAT LENT?

Other words for “Lent” in Armenian are:

Medz Bahk = “Great Lent”

Aghoohats = “salt and bread” (along with water, that is ALL one traditionally eats during the fasting days of Lent. More on that later.

HOW MANY DAYS DOES LENT LAST IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH?

In the entire Christian East, including Armenia, Lent begins on the 7th Monday before Pasha. This was already mentioned by St. Athanasius in his festal letters (4th century.) So for the Armenians, Lent begins on a Monday, and lasts exactly 40 days (but it was not always so...)

For the Armenian Church Great Lent ends on the Friday before Palm Sunday. That is the 40th day. The next day is Lazarus Saturday (the 41st. day). In the Christian East Lent does not include Holy Week, which begins on the Monday after Palm Sunday.

But beware. Forty days of Lent does not necessarily mean forty days of fasting since Saturday and Sunday were not traditionally considered fasting days in the Armenian Church. Saturdays during Lent are devoted to saints’ commemorations, and Sunday is always the Day of the Lord, when fasting was considered not only unwarranted, but prohibited! We do not fast when the bridegroom is present [Matthew 9:15]. Over the centuries, however, the overwhelming penitential spirit of Lent influenced the popular piety of the Armenian people. It became the custom to extend the Lenten fast also to Saturdays and Sundays, contrary to the ancient tradition.

WHY DOES LENT BEGIN ON ASH WEDNESDAY IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH?

In the Catholic Church, Lent begins on the Wednesday preceding the sixth Sunday before Pascha. Originally in Rome, Lent began on the sixth Sunday preceding Pascha and included Holy Week until, and including Holy Thursday. This makes 40 days; but it is only 36 days of fasting, since there is no fasting on Sunday (6 wks x 6 days = 36 days.) Later, four days were prefixed to the sixth Sunday before Pascha to yield 40 total fasting days. The first day of Lent is thus on Wednesday, which became known as *Ash Wednesday*.

WHAT CAN WE EAT DURING LENT?

This apparently simple question does not have a simple answer. The details of the authentic fasting tradition of the Armenian Church are still encoded in ancient canons, patristic writings and liturgical commentaries that are just now beginning to attract serious study. We know a few things for sure, however:

1. There is not one, absolute, universal set of fasting regulations valid for all parts of Armenia throughout the centuries. The same can be said for all of the Eastern (Orthodox) Churches. Fasting rules varied from Church to Church, and within a single Church from monastery to monastery, place to place, century to century. This is especially true in Churches of the Byzantine liturgical tradition. We have reams of polemical letters, from the earliest centuries of the Armenian Church, which attack the fasting practices of other Churches, notably our neighbors the Greeks, and which defend our own Lenten rules against their assaults.

2. Fasting was generally rather severe in Armenia, particularly in ancient times. One of the Armenian words for Lent, *Aghoohats* (Salt and Bread) was not an exaggeration. In at least some Armenian monasteries, the Lenten diet Monday through Friday was salt, bread, and water. We know that lay people followed this regimen as well. I have met Armenians from the old country who can remember that their parents or grandparents followed this discipline. This is the actual meaning of the word “fasting,” eating nothing but bread, salt, and water.

3. No meat or animal products were eaten during Lent. Definitely not from Monday - Friday.

4. For the Armenians there is no difference between “fish” and “meat.” In other words, fish is the same as meat, and neither were eaten Monday through Friday during Great Lent.

5. There is more uncertainty regarding wine (and all alcoholic beverages), oils (even olive oil), olives, honey, and some other foods. Those following the strictest rules abstained from these foods as well, while others in some places and times, did not.

WHAT ABOUT FASTING ON WEEKENDS?

Saturday and Sunday, from the earliest times, were not considered fasting days in the same way as Monday through Friday. In most places and times in Armenia, the fast was lifted or moderated on Saturdays and Sundays. Saturday, again, from ancient times, was devoted to the commemoration of saints and especially martyrs, who are the Church’s testimony (proof) of Christ’s resurrection. You will note that during Lent in the Armenian Church saints are only commemorated on Saturdays. During the rest of the year, saints are only commemorated on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and never on a day of fasting, Wednesday or Friday. The Armenian Church considers the commemorating the martyrs to be incompatible with the spirituality of fasting.

As for Sunday, the Council of Nicea (325 AD) already prohibits fasting on any Sunday, because this is the Lord’s Day, a day to celebrate the presence among us of the Bridegroom (see Luke 2:19 and parallels.)

Exactly how the Lenten fast was moderated on Saturdays and Sundays seems to have varied from place to place and time to time. Canon #7 of the local Armenian Synod of Duin (719 AD) suggests that there was a tolerable variance in weekend fasting practice in Armenia at the time:

And as for observing and breaking the fast on Saturdays and Sundays during the forty-days fast, this shall be left to each one’s will, as long as each gives thanks to God without scruple and adversity, and without speaking ill of the companion who desires to eat in moderation. Both are acceptable to God and are in the tradition of Christ’s Church.

SO HOW SHOULD I FAST OR ABSTAIN DURING LENT?

Ultimately, you have to create a fasting regimen, which you can reasonably follow, and which corresponds best to the purpose of fasting. We fast in order to realize our hunger for the Lord. When we fast we declare in deed that we can not live by bread alone. Fasting is a physical adjunct to prayer and a consecration of our lives to God. When we fast we willingly make a departure from our eating routine, a small sacrifice that produces a degree of inconvenience, of hunger. Those hunger pangs become for us physical “reminders” to fill the void not with a donut, but with the Word of God through prayer, devotion, and acts of charity.

You should moderate your fasting/abstention on Saturdays, and especially on Sundays during Lent. This does not mean eating a rack of ribs on Sunday after Church. Your diet should reflect both the Lenten spirit of self-

consecration to God, and also the joy of Christ's resurrection and the Kingdom of God, which we celebrate in a special way every Sunday – Lent is no exception.

The idea that Lent is a time of morbid sadness is a serious misunderstanding and a distortion of the true meaning of “penance.”

Finally, what is important is not the details of “what you give up” (see the canon cited above) but your attitude toward God. Your fasting regimen should lead you closer to God. It should draw you deeper into that “newness of life” granted to us by Christ's resurrection, into which we have been baptized.

Never lose sight of the fact, however, that even though each individual must choose his/her own fasting regimen, fasting is a spiritual exercise of the Church. The Church fasts during Lent as a corporate exercise in conversion and renewal, even though the details of how each of her members carries this out may differ. Let us beware of the current trend to so personalize and spiritualize Lent that it becomes devoid of its true meaning, and at worst becomes an exercise in self-worship.

Let me conclude with the sage words of the great scholar of the liturgy, Fr. Robert Taft: *“On the day of judgment the Lord is not going to ask you what kind of oil you put on your salad during Lent. But he will take you to task on whether you loved your neighbor.”*

WHAT IS THE RATIONALE FOR THE SELECTION OF SCRIPTURES TO BE READ DURING GREAT LENT?

The logic underlying the choice of Lenten Scripture readings tells us a great deal about the Armenian Church's understanding of Great Lent.

In order to understand the criteria for the selection of readings, we have to look at the historical development of the Armenian Lectionary. The Lectionary is a particular church's or denominations system for selecting certain passages of the Bible to be read during the church services throughout the liturgical year. The book containing these readings, in order of the church year, is also known as the Lectionary. The Armenian Lectionary (called *Jashots Keerk*) has its origins in Jerusalem, in the early Christian community.

There are several layers of Scripture readings during Lent in the Armenian Lectionary.

WEDNESDAYS AND FRIDAYS OF GREAT LENT

1. If you look only at the readings for Wednesdays during Great Lent you will find that the first five chapters of Exodus and most of the book of Joel are read sequentially.
2. If you look at the Fridays of Lent you will find similar, continuous reading of several chapters from Deuteronomy and Job.

This is the primitive pattern of Lenten Bible readings in the Church of Jerusalem around the turn of the 5th century. The Christians residing in Jerusalem heard these readings during their church services on Wednesday and Friday evenings. The Armenian Church adopted this system exactly.

MONDAYS, TUESDAYS, THURSDAYS OF LENT (EXCEPT THE SECOND WEEK)

Look at the list of Scripture readings for Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays of Lent with the exception of the Second Week of Lent, which I will discuss below.

You will notice one or two readings each of those days, taken randomly, it seems, from the Old or New Testaments. The total is 19 readings. These 19 Bible readings are not at all random. They constituted the syllabus in the course of studies required of all people who wanted to be baptized in the Church of Jerusalem in the fourth and fifth centuries.

During those early centuries, Christianity had only recently become a “tolerable” religion in the Roman Empire. Before that, followers of the Christian faith had to do so on pain of death if they were discovered. In the Roman Empire, as the Christian faith moved from being tolerable, to being fashionable, to becoming the official religion of the Empire, swarms of converts flooded the Church. These converts had to be instructed on the fundamentals of the faith before they could be baptized and considered full members of the Church, the Body of Christ, and heirs with Him of the good things God has promised.

This course of studies, referred to as the Catechumenate, consisted of instruction in the basics of the Christian faith. There were 19 sessions: each one began with a Scripture reading which summarized the material to be presented that day. The main themes of the course were two: baptism and the teachings of the Church as expressed in the Nicene Creed, which had just been adopted at the Ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325 AD. If you read the 19 readings carefully, you will see that the first few readings clearly focus on baptism and conversion, while the others form the scriptural basis for the articles of the Nicene Creed.

The professor of the Catechumenate was none other than the great theologian and church father St. Cyril of Jerusalem (died 444 AD), Bishop of the Jerusalem Church. He is the one who chose these readings, devised the syllabus, and gave the lectures on each of the 19 readings. Those readings have been handed down to us. They are usually called the “Catechetical Lectures of St. Cyril of Jerusalem.” You can find them (in a rather archaic English style) in Volume 7 of the Nicene-Post Nicene Fathers Collection (Second Series). You will see that St. Cyril’s 19 lectures are based on the 19 Bible passages indicated in the Armenian Lectionary (or Diocesan Calendar) for the Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays of Lent (except the second week of Lent).

St. Cyril’s Catechetical Lectures were among the first works translated into Greek from Armenian by St. Mesrob Mashdots and his disciples after they translated the Bible in the 30’s of the fifth century. In Armenian the lectures are known by the first words of the first lecture: *Gochoomun Undzayooyan* (Call to Consecration).

I want to underline that the Armenian Church is the only Church in Christendom that has preserved this ancient cycle of catechetical Bible readings from Jerusalem in its Lenten Lectionary.

The Armenian Church has programmed into its Lenten spirituality, in other words, an annual refresher course on the fundamentals of the Christian faith, as well as a reminder of our baptism, and an invitation to recommit ourselves to life in Christ, as expressed and inaugurated at our baptism.

WHAT ABOUT THE READINGS OF THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT?

Monday, Tuesday and Thursday of the second week of Great Lent are based on a different cycle of readings, featuring a good chunk of First Samuel, Proverbs and Jeremiah. The readings of the Second Week of Lent interrupt the flow of the catechetical readings. Scholars believe that originally Lent in Jerusalem (and thus in the Armenian Church) did not begin on the 7th Monday before Easter, but on the 6th Monday before Easter. The readings indicated in our Lectionary for the Second Week of Lent were probably originally read during the first week of Lent. They therefore represent an older tradition, when only the first week of Lent had daily readings. Every other week of Lent had readings only on Wednesdays and Fridays.

SATURDAYS AND SUNDAYS OF LENT

The readings appointed for Saturdays relate to the saints being commemorated on those days. These readings were appointed by the Armenian Church, for the Armenian Church. There were no readings on Saturdays during Lent in early Jerusalem.

The readings for Sundays correspond to those in the Byzantine Lectionary, used by the Eastern Orthodox Churches. They were probably adopted during the Cilician era, when the Armenian Church came under strong Byzantine influence in its liturgy.