

# Celebrating Our Faith

Byzantine Catholic Worship: *Our Church, Its Customs and Rich Heritage*

## The Holy Great Fast — Institution and Duration

**T**HE GREAT HOLY FAST (LENT) is one of the oldest and most sacred Christian practices. The history of the Great Fast is long and rich in tradition dating from Apostolic times. The pre-paschal fast is called Great, not only because of its duration, but also because of its significance in the life of the Church and of every Christian.

Therefore, the Fathers of the Church have the greatest respect and the highest praises for the holy fast. Regarding its antiquity, St. Basil (329-379) wrote: "Allow me again to appeal to history and to recall that fasting is very old and that all the saints observed it as though it were an inheritance from parents, transmitted from parent to child. Thus did this treasure come down to us an unbroken tradition."

### How Did the Pre-Paschal Fast Develop?

From Biblical times, the Apostles and the first Christian community began to replace the day of the Jewish Passover with that of the commemoration of the passion and death of our Lord. For them, the anniversary of the death of Christ was a very sad day, so to celebrate it worthily, they fasted on that day. Thus the original celebration of the Christian Pasch (Passover) began with a fast. This was the Pasch of the crucifixion. According to the testimony of St. Irenaeus (125-203), which the Church historian Eusebius (260-340) mentions, the present Forty Days Fast can be traced back to a time when fasting was restricted to one or two days. This fast was not regarded as a pre-paschal fast but as the Pasch itself. According to this testimony some kept the Paschal fast for one day, others for two, others even more, and some fasted forty hours. (History of the Church, 5:24)

### The Duration of the Great Fast

In the third century, the pre-paschal fast in some Churches lasted for a whole week, the week that today we call Passion (Holy) Week. Toward the end of the third century the Great Fast had been extended to forty days. The first clear testimonies concerning the forty days pre-paschal fast date from the fourth century, presented to us by the Council of Nicea.

According to an ancient tradition of the Eastern Church, Saturdays and Sundays were not regarded as fast days. Therefore, so that the total number of fast days would be forty, the fast was extended from six to seven weeks. By the end of the fourth century, the Great Fast had already become an accepted practice in both the Eastern and Western Churches.



## Giving Up Something for Lent

From a blog by William B. Bradshaw

**F**OR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, I have heard Catholics and Protestants of many denominations talk about what they are giving up for Lent. I was reared in a Congregational Church, known now as the United Church of Christ. We knew what Lent was, and there was mention of Lent from the pulpit, but as I remember, there was no emphasis on giving up anything. My parents, who were very active in the Church, never talked about it with my brother and me. As an ordained clergyman, I have pretty much adhered to my childhood rearing, and I never stressed the need for, or the importance of, giving up things during Lent.

Lent is a time for today's Christians to undergo personal self-denial and sacrifice in commemoration of the absolutely horrible physical and emotional pain Jesus endured starting on a Thursday night in the Garden of Gethsemane. While praying, He was betrayed by one of His original twelve disciples for twenty pieces of silver. He was then taken before two different judges, both of who refused to pass judgment, with the second judge letting a mob outside his chambers make the decision to crucify Jesus. Then, on the way to Golgotha, Jesus suffered the torment of verbal and physical abuses from the chanting crowds along the way. And, finally, He underwent the excruciating pain and humiliation of being crucified.

In recent years, the emphasis on giving up something during Lent has gradually been changing to focusing on positive behavioural changes. I propose giving up the practice of focusing on the faults of other people and, instead, looking for their good qualities. I am not suggesting that we just suppose that everyone around us can be trusted and we need not worry about our personal safety or the security of personal belongings — that would be foolish. I am referring to our fascination with reading, hearing, and talking about the bad, the ugly, the unsavoury.

All newscasts that I am aware of start out with murders, thefts, sexual abuses, ISIS executions, fires, wrecks, divorces of famous people, and other sad situations. In most newspapers, the lead stories usually deal with shocking and tragic events. As the old newsroom saying goes, "If it bleeds, it leads." But it doesn't have to be that way. My proposal for Lent is that we have a major change in attitude.

How many times at the local coffee shop do we overhear people say: "Just wait until I tell you about the most wonderful thing that happened to me this morning"; or "I'm so excited about the extraordinary way our boss treats us"; or "Our neighbours have the most well-behaved teenagers"; or "My husband does the most marvellous things for me"; or "The government is being so careful with how it spends our tax dollars"; and so forth. We seldom hear comments like that. Instead, we hear about the immoral, unfortunate, and sad things.



But regardless of how miserable people can be, it is usually possible to find some good in them. The same holds true with tragic events: usually we can find something good to come out of them. By giving up our inclination to find fault with others, perhaps other people will reciprocate by treating us in the same way. That could make all of us a lot happier and life more productive. Let's all of us, Christians of all varieties, give it a try during this Lenten Season. And it definitely wouldn't hurt for nonbelievers to join in.

Let's take a cue from Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, teacher, and political figure remembered for his popular statements of principle. Confucius says: "When you have faults, do not be afraid to abandon them."

# Is the Number “40” to be Taken Literally or Symbolically?

**ALTHOUGH WE SPEAK** of a ‘forty day fast’, nevertheless in the Eastern Church this forty day fast lasts only thirty-six and a half days. Seven weeks of fast, excluding Saturday and Sundays, leaves only thirty-five days. To this number Holy Saturday and half the night before Easter must be added. But this still leaves thirty-six and a half days of fast which constitute one tenth of the whole year.

The Latin (Roman Catholic) Church has a six week fast, including Saturdays, so that even in the West, the Quadragesima (for Forty Days Fast) consisted of only thirty-six days. Therefore, in order to have a full forty days fast, the Latin Church in the seventh century added still another four days to the beginning of the fast. The Latin Church therefore, begins her fast on “Ash Wednesday”, that is, the Wednesday of our first week of the fast.

From ancient times the number ‘40’, like the number 3, 7 and 9, was regarded as having a symbolic meaning, and it is in the symbolic rather than the literal sense that ‘40 days’ of the pre-paschal fast (Great Lent) must be understood. In the Old Testament we read about the Flood which lasted for 40 days (Genesis 7:4), the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness (Numbers 14:33), the forty days fast of Moses, before he received the tablets of the law from God (Exodus 34:28), and the 40 days journey of Elias to the mountain Horeb (1 Kings 19:8).

In the New Testament, the Gospels speak of the fortieth day on which Joseph and Mary presented the child Jesus in the temple, the 40 days fast of our Lord in the desert (Matthew 4:2), and the 40 day sojourn of our Lord on earth after His resurrection from the dead (Acts 1:2).

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The Holy Church from the very beginning sanctified the number ‘40’. During the first centuries, the practice of a forty day penance was customary. This was followed by the Forty Days Fast before the Pasch (Easter). In our Byzantine Rite, on the fortieth day after death, we commemorate the departed servant, and pray that the soul may be accepted into heaven; in some parishes, a newborn child is brought to church forty days after its birth so that the rite of Churching may be performed over it (nowadays done during the Sacrament of Baptism).

The number forty is used by God to represent a period of testing, trial or probation (the length of time necessary to accomplish some major part of God's plan in his dealings with various portions of mankind). The 40 days of rain in the days of the flood were the judgments of God. The 40 day periods of fasting, testing, and communing with God that were faced by Moses and Jesus were a form of God's judgments. The forty years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness were also the judgments of God. Various leaders in Israel who reigned for 40 year periods were put there by God according to His Will and Judgments. Egypt was left desolate for 40 years because of God's judgments.

# Saturdays & Sundays of the Great Fast

**I**N THE EASTERN CHURCH, the Saturdays and Sundays of Lent (Great Fast) are not regarded as fast days, in the sense that on those days there is no strict fast, *i.e.* total abstinence from food to a designated time. However, even on those days there gradually came into existence the practice of eating only certain types of food, such as bread, fruits, fish and in some place even milk. This means that on Saturday and Sunday there was no strict fast, but only abstinence.

The Kievan Metropolitan George during the Great Fast permitted all the laity to eat only fish twice a day on Saturday and Sunday. The Synod of Lviv (1891), speaking of the Forty Days Fast declared, “that, according to the present custom among the people, also Saturdays and Sundays are to be observed as fast days.” (Title XI) However, considering the distinction between fasting, in the strict sense, and abstinence, the Synod says: “However, in this matter one must consider local customs and needs.” (Title XI)

# The Prayer of St. Ephrem

**C**LOSELY CONNECTED with our Eastern Lenten services are inclinations. These are made either by bowing from the waist or to the ground (the low, profound bow or prostration or ‘poklony’), and are performed at all Lenten services from Monday through Friday.

The prayer of St. Ephrem (†373) with accompanying prostrations merits special consideration. This prayer, often repeated at every Lenten service, can be regarded the official penitential prayer of our Church, expressing, as it does, the whole content and purpose of the Great Fast. The Kievan Metropolitan George (†1073) in his “Rules” for priests and laity prescribed for all the faithful to make **three hundred** prostrations daily during the Forty Days Fast. Here is it in its entirety in both English and Ukrainian.



*O Lord and Master of my life, drive from me the spirit of discouragement, negligence, ambition and idle talk.*

*Grant me, Your servant, the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and charity.*

*Yes, my Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins, and not judge my brother or sister, for You are blessed forever and ever. Amen.*

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*Господи і Владико життя мого, духа млявості, недбайливості, владолюбства й пустосвлів'я віджени від мене.*

*Духа же доброчесноти і смиренномудрія, терпіння й любови даруй мені, недостойному рабові Твоєму.*

*Так, Господи Царю, дай мені зріти мої прогрішення і не осуджувати брата мого, бо Ти благословен еси на віки віків. Амінь.*