

Lenten Ritual and Practices

ORIGINS Lenten practices are rooted in our parent faith (Jewish) ritual practices and have been adapted for cultural contexts over the centuries. Christianity retained the Jewish practices of **fasting** (to cut down the amount of food intake- Lev 16:29) as a disciplinary ritual in preparation for religious remembrances and as a tandem practice to **almsgiving** (monetary donations to the poor, aliens, orphans and widows- Dt 10:18-19; 14: 28-29, Acts 6:1). Money saved by refraining from the purchase and consumption of certain foods could be offered to those less fortunate in the society. **Abstinence** (avoidance from certain foods and/or activities) was also a discipline and opportunity for almsgiving. Special **prayers** (communication with God – Book of Psalms, Mk 12:40) and prayer rituals would strengthen one during the solemnity of the preparation and religious remembrance. These practices are still done by Christians today during the Lenten season.

REGULATIONS According to the USSCB, those between the ages of 18-59 are obligated to fast: allowing 1 full meal and 2 smaller meals on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Abstinence from land and air animal meat is required for those ages 14 and above every Friday and Ash Wednesday (*Pastoral Statement on Penance*). Other penitential practices are usually disciplinary in nature or tied to acts to assist others. Pope Francis in his *Message for Lent 2014* has strongly encouraged increasing prayer and almsgiving. Exceptions for these practices are made for those who are ill, pregnant (or nursing) or those who might be physically harmed by the practice.

HISTORY The early Christian Church practiced what has been called a “Black Fast” in which 1 meal was eaten after sunset that did not include meat, wine, oil or dairy (many of these foods were eaten only by the wealthy in society) and the money saved was to be donated to the poor. In the 14th century, a small snack called a “Collation” was added at mid-day. In the 19th century, a small collation was added at mid-morning. In the early Church, the fast and abstinence periods were generally 1 or 2 days prior to Easter and were likely tied to the preparation for baptism of converts at that season. After the Council of Nicea (325 C.E), the season was established from the biblical number “40” and was then extended to 40 days. The beginning of Lent was established by Gregory the Great (540-604 C.E.) as Ash Wednesday rather than the Sunday that had been common practice after the Council.

PRETZELS Pretzels have been used during Lent as a food for over 1500 years. Because Lent was a time of refraining from meat and dairy products, people lived largely on breads and pastries. Basically only flour & water are used in pretzels making them a natural choice for baking during this season. Monastic bakers in Germany in the 15th century decided to bake something that even looked religious: the crossed arms of a pretzel were representative of a monk in prayer with his palms on opposite shoulders making a crisscross. Monks initially called these “little arms”. The word “pretzel” comes from the Latin word for shoulder, “bracella”.