

“PROPERLY OBSERVING THE PENITENTIAL SEASON OF LENT”

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Next Wednesday, March 1, will begin the season of Lent. The season of Lent is a forty day Christian festival beginning on Ash Wednesday and concluding on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. There are actually forty-six days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, but the six Sundays are not counted in Lent, since every Sunday is a “mini-Easter,” commemorating the resurrection of our Lord.

Lent originated in the very earliest days of the Christian Church as a preparatory time for Easter, when the faithful rededicated themselves and when converts were instructed in the faith and prepared for baptism. Though we are not certain how it developed, by 350 A.D., the forty day season we still observe was already in vogue in most places.

The early Christian Church took the season of Lent very seriously. It was observed as a penitential season in which Christians took stock of their sinful lives and recognized their desperate need for Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Lent was a time for fasting and repentance; a time for analyzing one’s life in relation to God’s commandments, realizing the profundity of one’s sin and inability to stand before God on one’s own. Thus, Lent was a time for self-awareness, which led to self-denial and sole reliance upon the sinless Son of God, who completely fulfilled the Law of God by living the perfect life sinful human beings are incapable of living and then, graciously and mercifully, submitted Himself to torture and execution on a cross to pay the price for the sins of all people of all time.

The Christian Church today observes the penitential season of Lent for the same reasons. Or, at least it should. Our sinful condition has not changed. We are, from the moment we are conceived, sinners in desperate need of salvation (cf. Psalm 51:5). Likewise, the way of salvation has not changed. We cannot save ourselves. We are “dead in sin” (Rom. 5:12) and completely incapable of fulfilling God’s Holy Law, which demands perfect obedience to God in thought, word, and deed. Our only hope for salvation is to trust in Jesus Christ, the Holy and Righteous Son of God, who came down from heaven and was Incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary in order to live the perfect life we cannot live and to die on the cross for our sins. There is no other way of salvation. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6).

So, because our sinful condition has not changed (and will not change) and because faith in Jesus Christ alone will remain the only way of salvation until the Last Day, the penitential season of Lent continues to provide Christians with an opportunity to recognize their sinfulness and to renew their trust in the Savior who takes their sin away.

But, sadly, many Christians fail to see Lent for what it is. Many do not observe the season at all. Many others see Lent as nothing more than a time for them to give up a personal vice or habit, or to deny themselves of something they love (“I’m giving up chocolate for Lent”). But, the season of Lent, which is not just an old, worn-out tradition the Church used to observe, calls for Christians to give up something far greater than a personal vice or habit. It calls for them to give up themselves and rely solely on Christ.

It is this pastor’s prayer that the upcoming Lenten season will lead Christians to examine themselves, recognize, and repent of, their sinfulness, and trust solely in Jesus Christ, who willingly went to the cross for the sin of the world on Good Friday and rose for the life of the world on Easter morning. In His Holy and Precious Name. Amen.

In Christ,

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