



40 Days and 40 Nights

Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, *People of God*, February 2012 issue

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, February 22, and Easter Sunday is on April 8. There are 40 days (and 40 nights) in Lent not counting the Sundays. Lent is, for us Catholics, a very important period in which we prepare by abstaining from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and on all Fridays of Lent, fasting which is required on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, special prayer and alms giving for the Resurrection of Jesus which we call to mind on Easter. The name “Lent” is from the Anglo-Saxon word “lencten” meaning spring or the lengthening of the days as they become longer. The Spanish word for Lent is “Cuaresma” which is based on the actual 40 days. So there is a difference in the way that the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin language groups describe this important time of the year.

The number 40 was first noted in the Canons of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea held in 325 and it was in imitation of Jesus’ 40 days and 40 nights of fast in the desert before his public ministry.

It is important for all Catholics to enter in the spirit of prayer and sacrifice to prepare ourselves for the suffering, death and resurrection of Our Lord. It is a time for Catholics to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation (also known as Confession or Penance). The clergy wears the purple vestments and do not pray the Gloria or Alleluia during the Lenten Masses. It is also a time in which the Catechumens, those preparing for the Easter Sacraments, go through the Rite of Election in the Cathedral Basilica or another designated Catholic Church. Those to be baptized and those completing their Easter Sacraments spend the Lenten Season in special preparation for the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday.

I take the opportunity as archbishop to go to the Metro Detention Center on Ash Wednesday to give the ashes to the inmates and prison staff. Then I return to the Catholic Center to distribute ashes to the staff and then go to the Cathedral Basilica for Mass and ashes. On Good Friday, I lead a walking pilgrimage at 7:00 a.m. from Santa Cruz to Chimayo and pray with the thousands of people along the way. Usually a seminarian prospect goes with me. In the afternoon we go to the State Penitentiary to have the Stations of the Cross – one station in each pod or area of the prison.

Lent is a time when most of us make a Lenten resolution or two and we seek to be more faithful to prayer, almsgiving and good works. It is helpful for good Catholics to make it to daily Mass and to the Stations of the Cross on the Fridays of Lent. All of our parishes have the Stations of the Cross in which we reflect upon the sufferings of Jesus as he made his way to Calvary. Lent is an appropriate time to be reconciled to someone that you may not have had a good relationship lately. Perhaps it could be a family member, neighbor or someone at work. Draw upon the Holy Season of Lent to be reconciled to someone if there is someone that needs the reconciliation.

It is said that one cannot celebrate Easter and the Resurrection of Jesus very well if they have not walked with the Lord during the Lenten Season. It is hard to have resurrection on Easter without the cross of Good Friday - the Cross of Calvary! I hope that your Lent will be a fruitful one for your spiritual life and will be an occasion to deepen your practice of our Catholic faith.