

Concerning the Lenten Season Leading Up to Pascha

Orthodox Christians have always celebrated Pascha, the Feast of our Lord's Resurrection; however, the season leading up to Pascha has not always consisted of the same observances or duration.

Originally, Christians prepared for Pascha with a brief fast beginning on the Friday before, in remembrance of Christ's crucifixion, burial, and eventual rising from the dead. This strict fast (i.e., no food or drink at all) commenced on Holy Friday morning and lasted until the Paschal Liturgy early Sunday morning, in duration about *40 hours*. The ancient words for Lent - Gk., *tesserakonti*; Lat., *quadregesima*, both meaning "forty" - referred to the forty-hour fast. [The word *Lent* is an Old English one meaning "spring" and is applied to the Fast because it occurs in the springtime of the year.]

During the second and third centuries, in different local churches and regions, the preparatory time beginning with the Crucifixion expanded to include all of what we call Holy Week, commemorating all of the events surrounding Christ's Entry into Jerusalem, His Suffering, Death, and Resurrection. Even today, Holy Week is kept in the Orthodox Church as something separate from the season of Great Lent; it is the unique and pivotal final chapter in the life of Christ prior to His Resurrection.

The *forty-day* season of Lent did not become fixed in all the Church until the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea (325). Prior to this council, various local churches developed a multi-day, multi-

week pre-Paschal fast according to local custom, some for three weeks, some for seven or eight weeks.

With the legalization of Christianity and its acceptance in fourth century society, the Church employed the standardized forty-day season of Lent (see Matt. 4:2) for two important purposes. One, because Christianity was no longer illegal, but acceptable to the masses, the ancient disciplines became somewhat relaxed; so, the Lenten fast was a time of re-training in basic virtues: abstaining from certain foods, repentance, prayer, and righteousness. Two, with the new influx of "converts" to Christianity, Lent became the final phase of instruction for those intending to enter the Church; the *catechumens* (lit., "those receiving instruction") were then baptized during the Paschal Vigil.

After centuries of practice, the sequence of Pascha, Holy Week, and Great Lent received its final and introductory observances in the tenth or eleventh centuries - the season of Pre-Lent, or the Lenten Triodion. This preliminary period now consists of three weeks and four Sundays, easing people into the Fast with the proper attitudes of humility, contrition, mercy, and forgiveness.

The Lenten season leading up to Pascha developed naturally and organically within the Church to fulfill basic spiritual needs of our human person. We understand Lent not as a man-made "rule," but as a genuine way of life guided by the Holy Spirit over time, truly to share in the Resurrection.

THE DURATION OF THE LENTEN SEASON

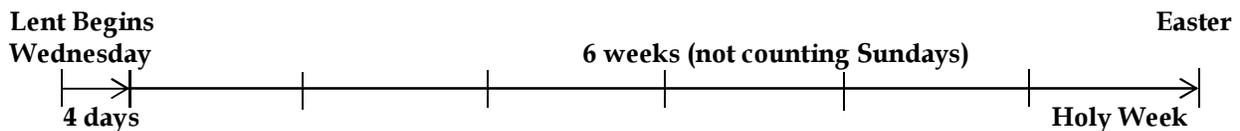
Orthodox Lent

In the Orthodox Church, the Lenten season does not include Holy Week (7 days), the week before Pascha. Thus Great Lent (40 days) precedes Holy Week and always begins on a Monday.



Western, Roman Lent

In the Western, Roman Church, the Lenten season of 40 days includes Holy Week, but it does not count Sundays in the 40 days because Sundays are not reckoned as fast days. Therefore, Roman Lent is six 6-day weeks (excluding Sundays) plus four more days ($36 + 4 = 40$) before Easter, which accordingly always begins on a Wednesday (known as Ash Wednesday).



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FORTY DAYS

The season of Lent, by convention, is forty days long. It is forty days because of the significance of forty-unit periods in the Scripture, as follows:

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| Genesis 7:12 | forty days and nights of rain during the Flood; |
| Exodus 24:18; 34:28 | Moses twice on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights to receive the Law from God; |
| Deuteronomy 8:4 | Israel wandered in the wilderness forty years before entering the Promised Land; |
| 3[1] Kgs. 19:8 | Elijah journeyed forty days and nights to Mount Horeb; |
| Matthew 4:2 | Christ Jesus fasted forty days and nights in the wilderness prior to being tempted by Satan; |
| Acts 1:3 | Christ Jesus appeared to His apostles for forty days after His Resurrection prior to His Ascension into heaven. |

Forty denotes a season of testing, self-denial, and progress toward the goal of communion with God, the hope of participation in the Kingdom of God in the light of Christ.