

# Lenten Blessings



By Rosalie Maggio

## About Lent

### What is Lent?

Lent is the period of 40 days' penitential preparation for Easter. During this time an urgent summons to repentance goes out to Christians: "Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor. 6:2).

### How old is Lent?

Lent, which comes from an old English word for *spring*, dates back nearly to apostolic times, when a one- or two-day period of fasting preceded the Passover festival. The earliest reference to a 40-day Lent appeared in 325 A.D.

### What are the Lenten regulations on fasting and abstinence?

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of fast (one full meal, two smaller meals, and nothing in between for those 18 to 59 years of age) and abstinence (no meat for all those over 14). All the Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence.

### What is the mood of Lent?

The mood of Lent is one of sober watchfulness, self-examination, moderation, and simplicity. It is a time to review and renew our relationships with God and others, to expect ourselves to reach a little higher, to dig a little deeper, to become more fully the people God created us to be. It is a time to deal with our weaknesses, to ask forgiveness for them, and to resolve to do better.



### Why are there 40 days in Lent?

The 40-day period is suggested by Christ's 40-day fast in the desert. However, the number 40 has additional references in the Hebrew Scriptures; the Jews spent 40 years wandering in the desert; Elijah spent a lonely 40 days journeying to Mt. Sinai; Moses spent 40 days on Sinai in the presence of God; Noah's ark was rained upon for 40 days and 40 nights; the people of Nineveh fasted for 40 days after Jonah carried God's warning to them. Scripture scholars say that biblical numbers often have symbolic meanings: Three is common in ritual prayer (holy, holy, holy); seven indicates completion or perfection; 12 expresses the fullness of Israel (12 tribes) and the Church (12 Apostles). Forty symbolizes a generation, a large number, a long period of time, a time of preparation for a great event.

Note that there are 46 calendar days in Lent, but since fasting is forbidden on Sunday, there are only 40 days of actual fast. In the eastern Church, where fasting is forbidden on both Saturday and Sunday, Lent begins on a Monday, eight weeks before Easter in order to make 40 days of fasting.

### Where does the dust-to-dust idea come from?

On Ash Wednesday, when your forehead is marked with ashes in the Sign of the Cross, the priest says, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return." These words, which come from the story of the Fall in Genesis, inspire us to spend the next six weeks remembering our mortality and the risen life that we have in Jesus.

### Why do we say that we "bury the Alleluia"?

The Alleluia, a Hebrew exclamation of joy, is dropped from the liturgy on the Saturday before Septuagesima (the third Sunday before Lent, marking the beginning of our preparation for Lent). We thus "bury" it and it is not heard again until the Easter Vigil. The Alleluia does not fit the somber mood of this season; we save it for the joy of Easter.

### What are the three major themes of Lent?

Baptism, penance, and the passion of Christ.

One of the principal purposes of Lent in the early Church was the prepara-

tion of candidates for the solemn Baptism on Easter night; most of the Lenten readings reflect this with their references to water, raising from the dead, and light. Today parishes have RCIA (Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults) programs whose catechumens are baptized at the Easter Vigil.

We emphasize penance both as individuals and as a Church; we remember and reclaim our baptismal vows in an effort to go forth and sin no more.

Through the Lenten readings we relive in a very real, not merely commemorative, way the passion of Jesus Christ.

