

How Christians Used to Fast During Lent

Today is Ash Wednesday, which signals the beginning of Lent for many Christians. As many of you know, Lent has traditionally been a 40-day period of preparation for Easter accompanied by fasting (going without food and drink) and abstinence (avoiding certain food and drink).

However, the practice of fasting and abstinence has largely been abandoned or curtailed by most Christians. Many Protestants have given it up all together under the guise that such “works” cannot contribute anything to their salvation. Others, such as Roman Catholics, have severely reduced their fasting to having “one full meal” on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent (but only for those who are at least 14 years-old).

As Cambridge scholar Eamon Duffy has [lamented](#),

“So fasting is now confined to a derisory two days of the year, and compulsory Friday abstinence has been replaced by a genteel and totally individualistic injunction to do some penitential act on a Friday—an injunction, incidentally, that most Catholics know nothing about. What had been a corporate mark of identity has been marginalized into an individualistic option.”

So what did fasting during Lent used to look like for Christians? The classical source for the fasting rules is a letter that Pope Gregory the Great wrote to St. Augustine of Canterbury in 604. In it, he told Augustine, **“We abstain from flesh meat and from all things that come from flesh, as milk, cheese, eggs.”**

As Francis Weiser [writes](#) of the rules in Pope Gregory’s

letter, "For almost a thousand years this remained the norm of abstinence for all except those who were excused for reasons of ill health."

Knowledge of these more strict rules of abstinence helps make greater sense of other traditions. For instance, on Shrove Tuesday (the day before Ash Wednesday), it was the English custom to make pancakes as a way to use up the rest of the dairy in the house. And, of course, the tradition of Easter eggs exists because it was the custom to abstain from eggs throughout Lent.

In addition, as Weiser notes, there was also the practice of taking only one meal per day throughout all of Lent (similar to the Muslim practice during Ramadan):

"The observance of Lent also includes the jejunium (fast in the strict sense). Its early practice consisted of eating only once a day, toward evening; nothing else except a little water was taken all day. After the eighth century, the time for this one and only meal was advanced to the hour of the None in the liturgical prayer (meaning the ninth hour of the Roman day, which is three o'clock in the afternoon). This meal was gradually transferred to the middle of the day (hence our word noon, from None). The noonday meal did not become a general practice until the fourteenth century."

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, it is still the custom to maintain strict abstinence throughout Lent, avoiding meat, fish, eggs, dairy, wine, and olive oil. However, of course, as in the Western churches, the recommendation is always to fast according to one's strength. Plus, as St. John Chrysostom (349-407) reminds, "True fasting is to put away all evil, to control the tongue, to forbear from anger, to abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury."

It's not surprising that the practice of fasting has seen such a decline in modern times. We live in a society that tends to

feast first and then fast; to consume without a preparatory struggle and sacrifice.

But perhaps John Henry Newman was on to something when he wrote, "None rejoice less in Easter than those who have not grieved in Lent."