

Lenten Customs and Traditions

Customs and traditions bring forth the spirit of a season or a feast. They connect the holy mysteries being celebrated in the liturgy to our everyday life: our working, recreating and eating.

Lent is a most important liturgical season, a time of preparation for the main event in the life of the Church and her members: the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord, on which rests our whole faith.

The Lenten climate that a mother or father or big sister creates in a family deeply affects its members. It is indeed a climate! One has to really be alert and awake, because we live in a secular society. To create this atmosphere in our Madonna House communities, preparations for Lent are set in motion weeks *before* Ash Wednesday. Our cooks, handicrafters, librarians, choir and musicians, our priests, everyone contributes.

About two weeks prior to Lent, even as our minds and hearts are gradually getting molded into an anticipation of the penance of the season, we begin preparing for our neo-Christian version of Mardi Gras or Carnival! The original purpose of this feast, in medieval Europe, was to use up any rich food in the house before beginning the Lenten fast: Mardi Gras means “Fat Tuesday,” the day before Ash Wednesday. Thus people entered Lent without having any rich leftovers to use. It also involved a party atmosphere, a last fling before settling into the serious work of Lent. We usually have a pancake supper.

Traditionally we put on a talent show for this occasion, calling it our “Pre-Lent Event” or “Ash

Bash” or whatever imagination suggests. It can involve music, humor, drama, any uplifting talent, and all are welcome to submit appropriate acts. (We have recently changed the day of the show from Shrove Tuesday to the previous Sunday evening, so as to enjoy the merriment and still have time to get recollected and ready to begin Lent in earnest on Ash Wednesday morning.)

Our cooks try to make our meals very ordinary and plain or simple during Lent, to help keep our focus off food. Little extra treats that occasionally are served during the year are eliminated during Lent. Monotony is an intended spiritual aspect of Lent, whether in our family prayer and hymns or in menu.



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Each person makes personal efforts to practice the three means of penance mentioned in liturgical Scripture readings in Lent: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. “Alms of the heart” are encouraged: gentleness, forgiveness, a smile and kind word — as are “alms of service” to others, hidden or not — “random acts of kindness.” Daily reading of Scripture is encouraged.

Those in our family who know books make a display of books and suggestions for personal Lenten reading. This can be expanded to include audio books and videos appropriate to this season of repentance. Other reading or viewing is curtailed; the idea is to focus on the spiritual meaning of Lent.

Every Saturday after lunch we prepare our hearts for the coming Sunday, the Lord’s Day, by reading aloud together the Scripture readings for Mass of that Sunday, and discussing how they apply in our lives.

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Posters or scrolls with short, meaningful Lenten quotes are made by the more artistic members of the family, and put up in the dining room (or on the family frig!) A new one is put up every week; they are one-liners taken from Scripture or favorite Lenten hymns.

Holy Week has its own special customs that expand our appreciation of its intensely significant events.

Banners or posters are created in preparation for Holy Thursday. The theme may be the Eucharistic supper; the washing of the apostles' feet by Christ; the Lamb of God; or words of appreciation for the gift of the priesthood established by Christ on this day.

Holy Thursday begins the *Triduum*, the three holiest days. At the evening meal we traditionally serve foods symbolic of the day: lamb, bread, wine. It is one of the most formal meals of the year, with white tablecloths and candles. Everyone dresses up. Before the meal begins, the history and meaning of the liturgical events of the day are explained: the Passover, the institution of the Eucharist and the priesthood. A short passage about the Hebrew Passover is read from the book of *Exodus* (*Ex 12: 1-14*). Then at the end of the meal "the Priestly Prayer of Jesus" from chapter 17 of St. John's Gospel is read aloud: Jesus' intimate words to his Father on our behalf. We end with a hymn. The very formality of the meal sets this day apart from all other days.

On Good Friday, by contrast, the tables are left bare, with only a plain wooden cross on each. Hot cross buns are made and served for breakfast; they are spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg, and we explain that these spices symbolize myrrh and other aromatics that were used in the burial of Christ. A cross is made in the dough on top of each bun.

Posters for Good Friday include the cross, crown of thorns, or 3 nails and some of Christ's last words. The evening meal consists of boiled potatoes and tea. A reading is done aloud from the prophet Ezekiel (*Ez 37: 1-14*), the part about commanding the "dry bones" of Israel to resurrect. The whole family decorates the boiled Easter eggs. The results can be more or less artistic according to talents; the important thing is to use Christian words or symbols of the resurrection. Eggs are a symbol of eternal life, of the new life we live in Christ.

For Holy Saturday, a large, bare, rough cross made of planks or branches and draped with a purple or white cloth is the focal display in the dining room. Three nails are placed at the foot of it, and a crown of thorns at the crossbar. On Holy Saturday we remove all banners and posters to echo the silence of the tomb in which Christ's body lies. By afternoon, we begin decorating the house for Easter...

Adapted from *Season of Mercy* by Catherine Doherty, pp. 139-151
Artwork by Donna Surprenant