

Giving it up for Lent

It seems fasting's strictly epicurean roots have grown to include abstinence from television, video games and . . . sex.

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Passion charged the room. The purple, silk-covered duvet shimmered. Clasp my hands delicately, she drew them to her bosom, levelled sincere eyes with mine and whispered: "I want to give up sex for Lent." Suddenly, her hot hand felt like a chilled haddock. I let it go.

Lent. Purple bedding. I had been led into temptation and repulsed in a bedside conversion.

"Lent is a season for soul-searching and repentance; a time for sacrifice," she said. "It's just something I feel like I have to do and, if you love me, you'll understand."

Of course I understand, I'm Catholic: Jesus died for our sins, now I have to pay for hers.

Having just attended a rambling Ash Wednesday mass with her (my first service in almost 20 years; the anticipated bolt of lightning failing to strike: apparently heaven can wait), I thought my Catholic (and supportive-boyfriend) duties, were done. Now I felt purgatorial. What the hell is Lent, anyway?

"Maybe you should find out," she challenged. "Lord knows, you'll have the time."

Lent, I found, is a Teutonic word symbolizing the 40-days' fast preceding Easter on the Christian calendar. It is an Anglo-Saxon translation (meaning spring) of the more significant Latin term *quadragesima*, meaning the "forty days" or, more literally, the "fortieth day." And with origins arguably dating back to the apostolic era, observation was universal in the ancient church.

Today, Lent remains a time when devout Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodist, Lutheran and Anglican denominations, as well as Eastern Orthodox Churches (with subtle differences) rededicate themselves by marking the 40-day withdrawal into the wilderness by Jesus.

In biblical terms, the number 40 represents probation or trial. The Israelites wandered (and wondered) for 40 years (Deuteronomy 8:2-5); Moses bivouacked on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights (Exodus 24:18); ditto for rain-lashed Noah's Ark (Genesis 7:12); and Jonah's 40-day proclamation to Nineveh probably spared the locals getting knocked six-ways-to-Sunday by the wrath of God (Jonah 3:4). Would my obligatory suspension generate similar absolution? More importantly, would it get published?

Revelation! Further research establishes that the six Sundays in Lent are omitted in the 40-day count. Sundays, the day of the Resurrection, remain celebratory; a weekly respite from Lenten self-denial and the weighty lessons taught by the rest of the season.

Had I stumbled upon new evidence in my dusty attic? A loophole of biblical proportions? Like a witness to Moses' parting of the Red Sea, epiphany reigned! Surely this was a sign, if not from Heaven, then an Old Testament indication of indulgence tolerated.

My exodus seemingly overturned, I thumped my chest and prepared to return to the Promised Land.

First Sunday: Armed with knowledge, asbestos-filled lungs and primed to chase the chaste but discover

only an apologetic epistle tacked to her door: "Sorry, babe. Have to work Sundays now . . . I think there's fruit . . . Help yourself!"

By the time the sole piece of fruit in the place can be sniffed out (a ripe peach), hunger pangs have reduced my libidinous roar to a whimper. The peach satisfies neither appetite.

In many countries, the Tuesday before Lent signals last call for the indulgent to, well, indulge: Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday), Shrove Tuesday or *Fasching* festivities are all synonymous with masks, music and madness and, occasionally, licentiousness. But for centuries, the looming fast meant abstaining from meat, which is why some refer to the festival as carnival, Latin for "farewell to meat."

But not just meat. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church prescribed the Lenten daily menu, and Lent meant additional prohibition. Milk, butter, cheese and eggs were also bid adieu, reflective Christians subsisting on bread, porridge or gruel made of grain, peas or beans, salted or dried vegetables, apples, nuts and fish. Yes, fish! (A fishy explanation of this is that during the biblical Flood -- a flood intended to punish all mankind -- the fish survived. Clearly, fish swim without sin.)

Like the fit of jeans, present-day fasting regulations have been relaxed (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday remain fast days, with one fully meatless meal, and possible two smaller meatless meals allowed, depending on needs), with emphasis shifting from church mandate to individual responsibility. Thus, fasting's strictly epicurean roots have grown to include abstinence from television, video games and . . . sex.

"Beggars can't be choosers," my father often laments. Maybe not, but they can still pray (coincidentally, another Lenten discipline).

So with penance and patience in the heart, I've soul-searched, repented and am prepared to sacrifice.

But next year, I pray my girlfriend gives up Lent. If she loves me, she'll know why.

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