

Great Lent in the Armenian Church

What is Lent?

Lent is a period of time that the Church dedicates to spiritual growth and discernment. This period originally served as a period of instruction for new-converts before their baptisms, which would take place during the Easter Vigil. Over time, the entire Church adopted this period as a time of prayer, fasting, and charity, in preparation for the celebration of Holy Week.

In Armenian, we call the Lenten Period Մեծ Պահք (Medz Bahk), which literally translates to “the Great Fast.” The reason why Lent is called the Great Fast, is because the Church engages in multiple fasting periods throughout the year, Great Lent being the most important and longest of them. These other fasting periods include most Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year, which are designated as fasting days in remembrance of Christ’s betrayal and crucifixion respectively. The weeks leading up to other major feast days like Christmas and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross are also designated as fasting days.

These fasts provide an opportunity to prepare physically, mentally and spiritually for the feast days they precede. Even a secular feast, like families gathering for a turkey dinner on Thanksgiving, cannot be fully enjoyed if we feast on turkey dinners every night leading up to it. By feasting during the days leading up to Thanksgiving, this extravagant meal, intended to celebrate our blessings and bring people together, is reduced to just another ordinary meal. Therefore, we fast during Lent in anticipation of a celebratory feast on Easter Sunday, which will accompany our liturgical celebration of Christ’s resurrection, the most important event in history.

Just as it is hard to truly appreciate feasting during holidays if every day is a feast, it is also hard to devote mental energy toward the celebration to come if we are constantly eating large and filling meals. Think about how you feel after Thanksgiving dinner; we typically feel sluggish and only have enough energy to sit on the couch and watch football. In contrast, when talking about things that we are really focused on and motivated to do in life, we describe them as things for which we hunger or thirst. We use phrases like “he’s hungry for that promotion” or “she’s thirsting for change in her life.” In a similar way, during Lent we eat less to sharpen our mental acuity, to focus on things beyond the physical, to hunger the Kingdom of God.

And finally, we fast during Lent to walk the path Christ walked, who himself fasted for 40 days before his earthly ministry. We limit the foods we eat to imitate Christ who fasted fully from food. We dedicate more time to prayer and contemplation, as he did while fasting in the desert. And we double down our efforts to help the poor and the needy, as Christ did throughout his ministry. The Lenten season is not merely a nice symbolic custom we uphold for tradition’s sake, but a crucial part of building up our physical, mental and spiritual disciplines to live our Christian vocations more fully.

How long is Lent?

Although this may seem like a simple question, there are different teachings in Armenian Church Tradition as to the length of Great Lent. Some Church Fathers describe Lent as a 40-day period. We arrive at this number by counting from the day after Բուն Բարեկենդան (Poon Paregentan) up until the start of Holy Week, which begins on Lazarus Saturday, the day before Palm Sunday. This way of counting Lent connects the season with Christ's 40 days of Fasting in the Wilderness, the 40 days and 40 nights of the Great Flood, 40 years the Israelites wandered in the desert before reaching the promised land, and many other examples.

However, along with the writings discussing the significance of the 40 days of Lent, there are other Church Fathers who write of Lent as being a 50-day period. To calculate Lent as a 50-day period, Lent would need to include the 40 days we discussed above plus all of Holy Week, and would therefore make the Lenten Period from Բուն Բարեկենդան (Poon Paregentan) through Easter Sunday. This way of counting Lent connects the Lenten Period with a Biblical regulation called the Year of Jubilee, where every 50 years, Hebrew slaves and prisoners would be freed, debts would be forgiven, and land would be returned to its rightful owner (Leviticus 25; Numbers 36). By calling Lent a 50-day period, we are reminded that we are like the Israelites, enslaved by sin and death, until that 50th day, until Easter Sunday when we hear the news that we have been freed from slavery to sin and death through Christ's death and resurrection.

The important thing is not how the days of Lent are counted, but what meaning we glean from reflecting upon the number we choose. By combining both interpretations, we come to see that Lent is a time to walk with Christ in fasting, prayer and charity, to escape the flood waters of a broken world, to travel through the desert of our monotonous lives in search of the promised land, and to be freed from bondage to sin and death.

What to do?

The wonderful thing about the season of Lent is that it is not one size fits all. The Church provides a rubric for habits which can help to enrich our spiritual lives and draw us closer to Christ. Based on Christ's Sermon on the Mount, the Church breaks our Lenten discipline into three concrete practices: prayer, fasting and charity, and a holistic Lenten regiment should incorporate all three of these areas (Matthew 6).

Prayer

Although we should always pray, Lent is a good time to take an account of our prayer lives and work on integrating sustainable and consistent prayer patterns into them. Consider picking a book of the Bible, maybe the gospels or the epistles of St. Paul, and read one chapter either in the morning or evening. This can be followed by 5 minutes of prayer and sitting in silence. A 10 minute practice like this may seem insignificant, but, when implemented consistently, it can bear much fruit like the "mustard seed, which...is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches." (Mt 13:31-32)

Fasting

The Traditional Lenten fast in the Armenian Church consists in holding a vegan diet and moderating the amount and frequency of our meals. That being said, this has never been enforced as a law, and flexibility has also been encouraged based on age, health, and other practical concerns. If you have never tried this before, a good starting point could be to include a few vegan meals per week, perhaps on Wednesdays and Fridays since these are the most ancient and traditional Christian fasting days. In addition to this, you can pick a practice or habit that is negative in your life and "fast" from it by cutting it out of your life during Lent to help you focus more on your faith life.

Charity

Unfortunately, modern English has limited the word charity to mean merely giving financial assistance to the poor. While charity in the Christian sense does include this, Christian charity encapsulates a much broader meaning. During the Lenten season, acts of Christian charity stem from our compassion for our neighbor. We are called to empathize with their pain,

whether that be financial, emotional, physical, psychological, or spiritual. And out of that empathy, we are called to concrete action with the purpose of helping ease their suffering. The Armenian word *ողորմութիւն* (*voghormootyoon*), is rooted in two other words that help us understand its meaning more fully: *իւղ* (*yoogh*) meaning oil, and *ողորկ*, (*voghorg*) meaning smooth. So just as God's charity to us is like an oil that smooths out the bumps in our lives caused by the brokenness of our fallen human condition, likewise, we should bring the smoothing oil of charity to others. Given this broader definition of charity, while also giving aid to the poor and marginalized during Lent, try to open yourself up to become empathetic toward all of those you encounter in your life, even those who actively avoid showing that empathetic charity to you. Find ways to help these people in the midst of their financial, emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering.

Activity – Lenten Commitments

Setting Concrete Goals

It can be easy to go through the Lenten season without opening yourself up to the wonderful growth that comes from engaging in the traditional practices of prayer, fasting and charity. In order to focus your Lenten discipline, during Badarak today, pray on one concrete way that you will regularly practice each of these three Christian disciplines during the Lenten season. At the conclusion of Family Sunday, we will separate these Lenten commitments from the handout, gather them together, and offer a prayer over them; asking that God may give us the strength to keep them consistently through Lent and that he may bless our efforts with spiritual fruit to foster our walk with Christ. These commitments will remain in the St. Gregory of Narek chapel during Lent and we will continue to pray over them throughout the Lenten Season.

Prayer:

Fasting:

Charity:

Altar Curtain Connect the Dots

