

## 40 Days and 40 Nights

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*A woman comes into the kitchen in the middle of the night to find her husband having a late night feast. She looks shocked and disappointed; her husband turns to her earnestly but defensively. The caption underneath reads: '40 days of Lent I can handle, but don't ask me to do the nights!'*<sup>1</sup>

Considering the lessons of Lent, as advocated by the Catholic church, and people's own personal experiences of Lent, I intend to explore: the social and community aspect of Lent in comparison with the individual factor; the social relations practiced through Lent; and finally, the understanding that Lent, as a religious institutional practice, consists of religion, individuals, community, and society. Specifically, this will be done by looking at the differences between the experiences of childhood and adulthood, contemplating the change in attitude and habit, as well as evaluating the difference between a Lenten promise and a New Year's resolution. Accordingly, this ethnography works towards answering what influence religious institutional practices, such as Lent, have upon social relations in terms of the individual, the community and society. And more particularly, to what extent are the individuals, who participate in the Catholic practice of Lenten promises, aware of the influence that the religious institutional practice has on their social relations as individuals and as members of a community? Are they aware of the lessons of Lent?

The period of Lent in the Catholic Church begins on Ash Wednesday lasting for forty days until Easter Saturday and is a time of fasting, abstinence and penitence for the remembrance of the crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>2</sup> This religious institutional practice is often viewed merely as a short time of 'giving something up', however, the lessons of Lent are far more extensive and are also intended to provide lessons for a truly Christian life. The real nature of Lent as a religious practice is supposed to create a profound experience and, indeed, change for the individual; beyond the cursory idea of abstinence, the practice of Lent requires fasting, prayer and almsgiving with definite lessons to be learned.

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<sup>1</sup> Cartoon by Steve Vaughn-Turner

<http://www.thesheepdip.co.uk/index.php? a=viewProd&productId=395>, accessed 05/05/11

<sup>2</sup> "Lent" World Encyclopedia. Philip's, 2008. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of St Andrews. 6 May 2011 (<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t142.e6666>)

## 'The Lessons of Lent'

The Right Reverend Monsignor Michael J. Conway has been the Parish priest at St. Ignatius of Loyola in Wishaw, North Lanarkshire for the past thirteen years. Despite knowing him for most of my life, waiting in the reception room of the Parish house, I felt anxious and aware of offending the Monsignor, as a man for whom I have endless, and essentially unconditional, respect. As always, however, the Monsignor was naturally welcoming, friendly and jovial, as he guided me through to an interview/activity room where we had an informal discussion on the importance and lessons of Lent.

In my discussion with the Monsignor, he shared the following ideas of Lent, which I have accordingly summarized into an explanation of the Catholic Church's lessons of Lent. Firstly, Monsignor stressed that there are three components to Lent, prayer, fasting and almsgiving and that it is the combination of these practices which contribute to the main idea of Lent; namely, that of reflecting upon your promise and your person under 'self-imposed selflessness'. When I asked him whether or not he believed a Lenten promise to be a matter between the individual and God only, or whether there was a community aspect, he responded that the Lenten promise is an honour contract to yourself and God, rather than a binding contract as most view it. On deciding that the promise has a community, social and family element, you can share the identity of the promise with others, but the journey of Lent itself is ultimately a more private affair. Considering this, Monsignor highlighted that the merit of the promise impacts on social interaction and relations, as it must not be selfish but for the good of God and others.

Additionally, the Monsignor explained the importance of encouraging a Lenten and giving culture for children, as well as the importance of self-reflection. Considering the practice of almsgiving, he stresses that the primary school community effort is vital; for example, some Scottish Roman Catholic primary schools ask each student and family to purchase a school bag, fill it with items such as pencils and jotters which are then sent off to partnership schools in Africa. Very popular is the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, SCIAF's 'wee box' whereby children put their small change, often money they might have otherwise spent on chocolate and sweets, each day into the 'wee box' which is then used by SCIAF to help those in need around the world.

I then asked the Monsignor if he perhaps thought that the set period of a Lenten promise might make the task seem easier for individuals in comparison to the idea of a New Year's resolution, whereby you try to change the habit of a lifetime. Monsignor believed that the idea of a beginning and an end reassured people attempting to keep a Lenten promise, but at the same

time the greater lesson is that it allows people a change of attitude for the better; to be a less selfish, socially responsible individual who wants to share with others in need. Even though Lent is only for a specific period, the idea is that you will continue practicing what you have learned beyond Easter, you will be re-born a new Christian, a better person; Lent is Spring. For the Monsignor, the idea is that the practice of Lent will rid you of selfishness, that you will grow as an individual, in your relationship with God and your relationship with others you wish to benefit, be it strangers, family or friends. It is this lesson that children embrace so openly and even enjoy, but as Monsignor highlighted, although these lessons contribute to the type of person you will become, I wondered what young adults, with clear memories of their childhood experiences of Lent, would now consider their attitude towards Lent to be.

### 'Experiences of Lent'

For the next stage of my ethnographic project I sent out questionnaires to my friends, all of who were raised Catholic and attended R.C. Primary and high schools. The questions covered three sections; Lenten promises, New Year's resolutions and a reflective overview. This approach was intended to allow them time and space to consider and reflect upon their answers as well as to remove my partiality and presence from the process, to as great an extent as possible. Six of my friends were able to provide responses, which for some questions were identical and for others demonstrated a difference in attitude to Lenten promises.

Each member of the group gave the answer that their earliest memory of making a Lenten promise was from early on in primary school; additionally, each of their experiences of Lent at primary school are similar with focuses on: giving something up that would be realistic and preferably beneficial to others; for those from Scotland, raising money for SCIAF; and generally being encouraged to be a nicer person, a better friend, a better child, in order to compliment abstinence with the undertaking of a positive challenge. These childhood experiences correspond with the Monsignor's lessons of Lent, and the importance of encouraging children to grow as selfless, responsible persons. Notably, however, when asked if they still maintain the practice now as young adults, with a Lenten promise every year, only two out of six of the group continued beyond leaving high school. It is at this point that a change in attitude towards Lenten promises can be noticed as the community encouragement of the school is removed, and in some cases also a decline in attendance of mass.

When asked about how successful they considered themselves in keeping their promises, the answers varied, but remarkably, after breaking their promise over half of the group would start again. Also, they noted that they often continued their abstinence from things if they benefitted, but most importantly some expressed that they continued to practice prayer and almsgiving more conscientiously and almost all of the group felt that Lent helped them realise something about themselves, particularly their ability to successfully undertake a challenge. All of the group agreed that there is a difference between the practice of Lent for a child compared to that of an adult; one of the more popularly expressed ideas followed that, 'As a child it can be difficult to fully appreciate that giving something up can benefit others... as an adult, more thought is put into the decision and a realisation of what you are doing is for the good of others... [it] is more of a personal choice.'

As for New Year's resolutions, all of the group admitted to making a promise; their earliest memory was often after learning to make Lenten promises or often under the influence of watching their parents make resolutions, and for the main part all acknowledged their non-fulfilment. As for any successful resolutions becoming habits, the group was divided.

Finally, they were asked to reflect upon their answers and attitude to Lenten promises, an exercise that gained the most interesting responses and in the main correlated with the Monsignor's lessons of Lent. When asked to consider the differences between Lenten promises and New Year's resolutions: half of the group noted the difference in time; a few mentioned the idea that 'a new year's resolution is really just to improve oneself, generally in more selfish ways than for lent' which is intended to benefit others; and only one connected the practice of Lent to Jesus: 'Lent is to do something good and relate to what Jesus did when he was fasting and relate to how hard it must have been for him to stay strong and not give into the devil's temptation.' Some members of the group advocated that a Lenten promise is a matter between God and the individual while others admitted that the support network of a like-minded community can often be invaluable in keeping a promise.

When asked what the ultimate lesson of Lent was for them, once again the answers varied: some believed it to be consideration of others less fortunate than yourself; others believed it was to learn that in comparison to what Jesus did for us, our promise is a small gesture and that this should motivate us to try harder; and finally was the opinion 'that if you do something for the good of others, you should try and do it for the rest of your life'. All of these responses are of course, in consideration of Monsignor's lessons, the right answers, if you will; the lessons to be

taken from Lent are vast and varied, there is a lesson available for each individual and it is definitely a case of what you want to take from it, you will find. After being asked to reflect on the exercise and if there were any new conclusions that they had reached about understanding Lent, almost all of the group commented that it had either renewed their enthusiasm in the practice or it had lead them to question why they had ever stopped making Lenten promises and come to a realisation that they would wish to participate once again.

### The Social Story

The first point worth noting is that there has never been direct interaction between my encounters; my Parish priest is not the priest from whom my friends have learned, not through school or chapel. Their connection is through Catholicism, the religious institution of the Catholic Church and most importantly similar experiences of Lenten promises. There is no direct interaction but a shared practice, if not a shared Faith. Ultimately, they interact through the same experiences but as has been demonstrated previously, they come to different understandings and conclusions.

The social relations explored are on a wider, less personal scale but at the same time, there is an exploration of: their relationship with God and their Faith; their relationship with their religion as an institutional practice; and ultimately the influence these factors have on their wider social relations, the way they lead their life and their regard of others, particularly those who are less fortunate.

### The Anthropological Story

The phenomenon of religion has long been a focus for the social sciences, particularly across psychology, sociology and anthropology. Although there seem to be no theories or works aimed at evaluating the practice of Lent in the Catholic church, many of the studied aspects of religion, as a phenomena in itself, reveal great insight into ritual practice, particularly the work of sociologist Emile Durkheim.

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* Durkheim expresses an idea at the heart of his work: 'religion is something eminently social' (Yinger 1965: 344). Durkheim's work as a sociologist focused on the 'importance of society - social structures, relationships, and institutions - in understanding human thought and behaviour' (Pals 2006: 85) and it was this perspective that

guided him towards the relevance of religion in human social life. In his study of suicide, Durkheim compared the social lives of Protestants and Catholics to conclude that, in comparison to the former, the latter 'belong to a more strongly integrated social community' (Pals 2006: 94).

Durkheim's ideas allowed him to consider the practice of rituals within a religious community, taking the view that 'Religious rituals and beliefs come into play whenever group concerns are foremost in the mind; the sacred functions as the focal point of the claims that affect the entire community' (Pals 2006: 96). Thus, he considers these rituals to be more rudimentary than beliefs as they provide occasions whereby the members of the community are called upon to renew their commitment, to be reminded of the importance of their social collective and the interests of the group, rather than selfish inclinations. Translated, this could be interpreted as - rituals being actions and beliefs as words - *actions speak louder than words*. Furthermore, rituals were for Durkheim, 'moments when the very fact of congregating to perform set actions imparted special energy to the participants. These emotions generated by ritual gave credence to religious beliefs and moral dispositions.'<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, Durkheim believes that in consideration of all these inferences, the cause of religion is always social. Religion's function is to concentrate attention upon the needs of society and to connect the members to this community accordingly, guiding each member through life with set ideas and practices. The traditions and rituals of religion 'are the true source of social unity, and in every society they are the realities that bind.' (Pals 2006: 110)

Applying this sociological perspective to Lenten promises, there can be seen a correlation between the lessons of Lent and Durkheim's understanding of religion as a social necessity and the practice of ritual in maintaining loyalty to the community. The concern with and the importance of the interests of others, as well as the focus on encouraging the principals and sentiments of an individual's life within a community, are all ideas expressed by the Catholic Church. Although my ethnographic encounter would demonstrate that not every individual realises every one of these lessons, each member of the group demonstrated that they did at least understand one lesson of Lent; perhaps through the different stages of their life, they will increasingly come to appreciate every lesson.

Completing this understanding of Lenten promises and religion, Yinger's article, *A Sociological Theory of Religion*, outlines a summary of the social integrative function of religion.

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<sup>3</sup> Science Encyclopedia, <http://science.jrank.org/pages/11170/Rituals-in-Religion-From-Evolution-Sociology.html>, accessed 06/05/11

Essentially, a religion as a social order must have a 'value scheme [that is] largely "self-enforcing" - built into the personalities of the members of the society - if it is to withstand the strains imposed by man's egocentric pursuit of his own interests.' (Yinger 1965: 71) Equally as important is Geertz's understanding of religion as a cultural system, vowing that explaining the phenomena of religion cannot be done without also understanding the system of the meanings it conveys, i.e. for the practice of Lent, the lessons it intends to communicate. Culturally, religion 'consists of ideas and beliefs about the world and an inclination to feel and behave in accord with those ideas' (Yinger 1965: 287); the ultimate lesson of the journey of Lent being to alter the habits of one's life for the good of God and others. Finally, Georg Simmel's *Contribution* identifies that 'Custom, law and the voluntary morality of the individual are different unifying elements of the social structure which can carry the same obligations as their content' (Yinger 1965: 333). Within religion and ritual, for Simmel also, there can be found the individual, the community and the social, all necessary components perpetuating the system from within themselves.

Complimenting the perspective of Durkheim, these theorists too highlight the importance of the individual, the community and society in religion, particularly in terms of practices and traditions. They recognise the merit and importance of institutional practices and their lessons and influences in maintaining the social order and cultural system of religion.

## Conclusion

In my approach to this ethnographic study, I can reflect upon my own habit to assume others' knowledge of the practice of Lent and its purpose, particularly in the peers that were interviewed. Before completing the anthropological process, my study of Lent was in pursuit of answers that would support and justify practices of Faith, creating a perspective to support an 'assumed' reality. At the same time, I believe this ethnography has the potential to make the familiar, exotic - particularly in consideration of 'assumed' perspectives on religion - after analysis through theory. Within the religious institutional practice of Lent, the perspective of my ethnography has created my 'assumed' reality, in so far as I have worked towards demonstrating Lent as an important practice, through which people's understanding of and participation in religion can be regarded (specifically, regarding the influence of the lessons of Lent as a child and how they shape persons as individuals and as members of a community in terms of the institution and faith of religion). My study, in particular, aimed to demonstrate furthermore that Lent indicates the social difference for religious practice as a child and as an adult.

Theorists including Durkheim, Geertz, Yinger and Simmel, recognise the undeniable social nature of religion as either a social order or cultural system; their work demonstrates the importance of the individual, community and society in religion and particularly the power of ritual and tradition in forming the individual as a member of the community and strengthening the society but considering it to be of primary importance. My ethnographic encounters demonstrated that the Catholic church intends to communicate the lessons of Lent, while the responses from young Catholics would indicate that, to varying extents, they have noticed the influence the practice has upon their attitude towards themselves and others, and thus their social relations. They have learned some of the lessons of Lent, but as the practice dictates, Lenten promises and lessons are a journey to be completed over a lifetime.

### **Bibliography**

Pals, D.L. 2006. *Eight Theories of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ward, K. 2000. *Religion and Community*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yinger, J.M. 1965. *Religion, Society and the Individual*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

### Internet Resources

- Science Encyclopedia, article on Emile Durkheim, [www.science.jrank.org](http://www.science.jrank.org)
- The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, [www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com)
- thesheepdip.co.uk, [www.thesheepdip.co.uk](http://www.thesheepdip.co.uk)
- World Encyclopedia, [www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com)