

What is Mardi Gras?



The Catholic Church has many traditions that turn ordinary days into special days of celebrating God's love. Many of these relate to the liturgy and the church's liturgical cycle. The word "liturgy" originally meant a "public work" or a "service in the name of or on behalf of the people." Webster's dictionary defines liturgy as "any public form of worship."

Lent is one of the Church's liturgical seasons. The word Lent comes from an Anglo-Saxon word for "spring." Beginning on Ash Wednesday, it is a season of penance and preparation for the solemn and joyful feast of Easter. It is a time of purification and enlightenment for the entire Christian community. Christians perform acts of penance and almsgiving to enlighten and purify their lives in preparation for the celebration of Easter mysteries. Lent lasts for 40 weekdays [patterned after Jesus' 40 days in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11)] ending on Holy Thursday with the celebration of the Last Supper. Sundays are not counted in the 40 days of Lent because Sunday is the day we celebrate Jesus' resurrection and is therefore a time of joy.

The celebration of the season of Lent dates back to the 4th Century or earlier. It was the period when catechumens readied themselves for Baptism. During Lent all baptized Christians are called to contemplate and renew through penance and prayer their own baptismal commitment.

Mardi Gras is not part of the Church's liturgical year. That's because it's not a liturgical event, even though its history is rooted in Catholicism.

Shrovetide is the English equivalent of what is known in the greater part of Southern Europe as *Carnival*, a word which is derived from *camera levare* or "taking away of flesh" which marked the beginning of Lent. The English term *shrovetide* (from "to shrive" or "hear confessions") is explained by the Anglo-Saxon *Ecclesiastical Institutes*, translated from Theodulphus by Abbot Aelfric (q.v.) about A.D. 1000:

"In the week immediately before Lent everyone shall go to his confessor and confess his deeds and the confessor shall so shrive him as he then may hear by his deeds what he is to do [in the way of penance]."

In this name *Shrovetide* the religious idea is uppermost, and the same is true of the German *Fastnacht* ("the eve of the fast"). It is human nature that before a long

period of deprivation one would allow some exceptional license in the way of frolic and good cheer.

The last day of *Shrovetide*, Shrove Tuesday, is known as *Mardi Gras* to the French and *fetter Dienstag* to the Germans.

Although the observance of *Shrovetide* in England never included the wild excesses which often marked a period of license such as those in warmer southern climates where *Carnival* was observed, still various sports were common and in the households of society it was customary to celebrate the evening of Shrove Tuesday by the performance of plays and masques.

Throughout history, the Church has repeatedly made efforts to check the excesses of this pre-Lenten celebration. For example, by *Super Bacchanalibus*, a special constitution from Benedict XIV, a plenary indulgence was granted in 1747 to those who took part in the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament which was to be carried out daily for three days during the *Carnival* season.

The *Mardi Gras* season that is celebrated in the United States, most notably in and around the city of New Orleans, begins on the Feast of the Epiphany, the 12th Night. Tradition has it that the Three Wise Men travelled for 12 days before coming to Bethlehem to find the baby Jesus. Starting on this day and continuing through *Mardi Gras*, “king cakes” are shared with family and friends. Hidden within the king cake is a small plastic baby (representing the baby Jesus); the person that finds the baby is revealed as “king for a day” and the honor is bestowed of providing the next king cake for all to share.

