

Holiday Symbols and Customs

FOURTH EDITION



EDITED BY HELENE HENDERSON

FURTHER READING

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WEB SITES

- New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia
www.newadvent.org/cathen/03245b.htm
- Punxsutawney Groundhog Club
www.groundhog.org



Carnival *(Mardi Gras)*

- Type of Holiday:** Religious (Christian)
- Date of Observation:** Dates vary, between Epiphany and Shrove Tuesday (Ash Wednesday Eve)
- Where Celebrated:** Central America, Europe, South America, United States, Caribbean Islands, and throughout the Christian world
- Symbols and Customs:** Carnival King, Forty Hours' Devotion, Fried Dough, King Cakes, Krewes, Ox
- Colors:** Purple, green, and gold (*see* KING CAKES)
- Related Holidays:** Ash Wednesday, Lent, Maslenitsa, Shrove Tuesday

ORIGINS

Carnival is a time when Christians celebrate before the start of **LENT**. The word Christian refers to a follower of Christ, a title derived from the Greek word meaning Messiah or Anointed One. The Christ of Christianity is Jesus of Nazareth, a man born between 7 and 4 B.C.E. in the region of Palestine. According to Christian teaching, Jesus was killed by Roman authorities using a form of execution called crucifixion (a term meaning he was nailed to a cross and hung from it until he died) in about the year 30 C.E. After his death, he rose back to life. His death and resurrection provide a way by which people can be reconciled with God. In remembrance of Jesus' death and resurrection, the cross serves as a fundamental symbol in Christianity.

With nearly two billion believers in countries around the globe, Christianity is the largest of the world's religions. There is no one central authority for all of Christianity. The pope (the bishop of Rome) is the authority for the Roman Catholic Church, but other sects look to other authorities. Orthodox communities look to patriarchs and emphasize doctrinal agreement and traditional practice. Protestant communities focus on individual conscience. The Roman Catholic and Protestant churches are often referred to as the Western Church, while the Orthodox churches may also be called the Eastern Church. All three main branches of Christianity acknowledge the authority of Christian scriptures, a compilation of writings assembled into a document called the Bible. Methods of biblical interpretation vary among the different Christian sects.

The season known to Christians as Carnival actually extends all the way from **EPIPHANY** (January 6) to **SHROVE TUESDAY**, or the day before **LENT**. The Latin *carne vale* means "farewell to meat," but it could also be a broader reference to the pleasures that are forbidden during the forty days of Lent. Carnival in general is a time for feasting and self-indulgence, with the most intense period of celebration usually taking place the last three days before **ASH WEDNESDAY** and particularly on Shrove Tuesday. It features masked balls, lavish costume parades, torchlight processions, dancing, fireworks, and of course feasting on all the foods that will have to be given up for Lent. It is interesting to note that processions, feasting, and masquerades were also popular activities among the pagans during their spring festivals, which were designed to ensure the health and growth of their crops. Most of the features of the modern Carnival celebration are firmly rooted in a tradition that can be traced back to the fourteenth century.

One of the most famous Carnival celebrations in the world takes place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The parades, pageants, and costume balls go on for four days, but the highlight of the festival is the parade of the samba schools, which takes place on the Sunday and Monday preceding Ash Wednesday. The competition among

these neighborhood groups is fierce, and people spend months beforehand making costumes and learning special dances for the parade.

The most flamboyant Carnival celebration in the United States takes place during the two weeks preceding Ash Wednesday in New Orleans, Louisiana. It was known among New Orleans' early French settlers as Mardi Gras ("Fat Tuesday") because the day before the start of Lent was traditionally a time to use up all the milk, butter, eggs, and animal fat left in the kitchen. This grand celebration culminates in a series of parades organized by groups known as KREWES. With marching jazz bands and elaborately decorated floats, the parades attract over a million spectators every year.

New Orleans' Mardi Gras has been cancelled only a few times in its 150 year history—during a 1979 police strike, the Civil War, and two World Wars. But it came very close to being cancelled again in February 2006. The previous year, on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina ripped through New Orleans, damaging many critical levees, leaving eighty percent of the city underwater, claiming more than 1,600 lives, and decimating city infrastructure, schools, hospitals and libraries.

Many residents of New Orleans, still mourning the loss of family, friends, and neighbors, felt it was too soon and too painful to celebrate Mardi Gras. Others thought the city needed to proceed with its cherished tradition in order to demonstrate its resilience, provide a needed distraction, and to promote psychological healing and financial recovery. Ultimately, the 2006 Mardi Gras did take place with over half of New Orleans' pre-Katrina residents still missing from the city, a diminished crowd of visitors, fewer krewes, and parades shortened and re-routed to circumvent the most severely damaged sections of the city.

SYMBOLS AND CUSTOMS

Carnival King

Carnival is an especially important season for Roman Catholics. In Italy, Spain, France, and other European countries where the influence of Rome has been the strongest, a popular feature of Carnival celebrations is a burlesque figure, often made out of straw and known as the Carnival King. When his brief reign over the Carnival festivities is over, the king is usually shot in public, burned, drowned, or otherwise destroyed while the onlookers cheer openly. This may be a symbolic act designed to rid the spectators of their folly and sinfulness.

One theory about the origin of the Carnival King is that he is a direct descendant of the old King of the **SATURNALIA**, the ancient Roman festival held in December. This pagan king was a man chosen to impersonate the Roman agricultural god Saturn for the duration of the celebration; but at the end, he suf-

ferred a real death rather than a make-believe one. The brutal custom of putting a mock king to death eventually faded, but the idea of appointing someone to reign over the festivities appears to have survived in the figure of the Carnival King.

Forty Hours' Devotion

To encourage good Christians to compensate for the excessive behavior exhibited at Carnival time, Pope Benedict XIV in 1748 instituted a special devotion for the three days preceding Lent. Called the "Forty Hours of Carnival," it is still held in many American and European churches where carnival celebrations are a long-standing tradition. The Blessed Sacrament is exposed all day Monday and Tuesday, and devotions are held in the evening.

Fried Dough

Most Carnival and Mardi Gras celebrations throughout the world include the preparation of some form of fried dough. In New Orleans, for example, the *beignet* is a square doughnut without a hole, similar to a fritter. In some areas of Germany, where Carnival is called Fastnacht, fried dough is served in the form of *Fastnacht Kuchen*. This raised doughnut was brought to the United States by the Germans who settled in Pennsylvania, and such fried cakes can still be found in other German-settled areas of the country.

Since it was customary on Mardi Gras, or "Fat Tuesday," to use up all the animal fat in the house before the start of Lent, food was often fried so the fat wouldn't go to waste.

King Cakes

The round or oval cakes known as King Cakes are one of the primary foods associated with the Carnival season. They are frosted with alternating bands of sugar in the three colors that have become associated with Mardi Gras: purple, symbolizing justice; green, symbolizing faith; and gold, symbolizing power. There are tiny dolls—or sometimes a bean—hidden in the cakes, and whoever is served the piece containing the doll or bean is crowned king for a day. In New Orleans, where the Carnival season begins with the *Bal du Roi* (King's Ball), a Parisian tradition, the person who gets the doll has to hold the next ball. These balls continue throughout the season, with the final one being held on Mardi Gras.

Krewes

The private clubs known as "krewes" that give parties, parades, and balls during the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans can be traced back to 1831 in Mobile,

Alabama. A man named Michael Krafft had been out celebrating New Year's Eve with his friends when they decided to break into a hardware store. They stole some cowbells and rakes, and paraded through the streets making as much noise as possible. This incident led to the establishment of the Cowbellion de Rakin Society, which organized a rowdy costume parade the following year featuring tableaux and dancing. In 1857, six men from Mobile who had been members of the society and who now lived in New Orleans decided to introduce a similar organization there, which they called the Mystick Krewe of Comus—a reference both to the masque (a dramatic entertainment featuring elaborate costumes, scenery, music, and dancing) *Comus*, written by English poet John Milton, and to the Greek and Roman god of revelry, feasting, and nocturnal entertainment. The word “krewe” is supposed to have come from the Anglo-Saxon spelling of “crew.”

By 1988, there were approximately sixty other krewes in New Orleans, and today they parade through the streets for nearly three weeks before Mardi Gras. Comus remains the most traditional krewe, producing floats for the parade similar to those seen a hundred years ago. The other krewes—with names like Rex, Zulu, Proteus, and Momus—are also private clubs, often linked to old-line Protestant or Catholic social networks. In addition, there are “maverick” krewes whose membership is open to anyone who can pay the required fee. The floats designed by the krewes range from the most traditional—small, delicate floats with a great deal of ornamental sculpture and extensive use of gold and silver foil—to considerably less formal processions of decorated vans and trucks.

Some think that the krewes and their parades go back to the *reynages* of medieval France—make-believe kingdoms established as part of the Carnival celebration. It is also possible that the floats seen in today's Mardi Gras parades were derived from religious tableaux originally performed in churches but moved outside when they became too rowdy.

Ox

One theory regarding the origin of “Fat Tuesday” or Mardi Gras is that it was named after the practice of leading a fattened ox through the village streets before Lent. Afterward, it was slaughtered to provide the final meal before Lenten restrictions on meat and dairy products went into effect.

In many Carnival celebrations held in France today, a fattened ox plays a central role in the festivities. A child known as the “king of butchers” usually rides in a decorated car behind the ox, and people throw confetti or blow horns as the ox and the butcher pass by. In New Orleans, the Krewe of Rex (*see* KREWES) is credited with reintroducing the fattened ox to the Mardi Gras celebration by using it as the theme for a giant float.

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WEB SITES

Louisiana State Museum
lsm.crt.state.la.us/mgras/mardigras.htm

World Music Productions
www.afropop.org/multi/feature/ID/33



Chalma Pilgrimage

Type of Holiday: Religious

Date of Observation: Varies

Where Celebrated: Chalma, Mexico

Symbols and Customs: Blessing of Holy Images, Crosses, Dancing, Flowers, Miracles, Offerings, Sacred Spring

ORIGINS

Chalma is located in central Mexico and has been a sacred site for thousands of years. In the Pre-Columbian period, native people worshipped Ozteotl (alternate-



Lent

Type of Holiday: Religious (Christian)

Date of Observation: Forty days, beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending on Easter eve

Where Celebrated: By Christians all over the world

Symbols and Customs: Birch Branches, Fasting, Lenten Fires

Colors: Lent is associated with the color purple, which symbolizes penance.

Related Holidays: Ash Wednesday, Carnival, Easter, Good Friday, Maslenitsa, Shrove Tuesday

ORIGINS

The observance of Lent is part of the religious tradition of Christianity, the largest of the world's religions, with nearly two billion believers in countries around the globe. The word Christian refers to a follower of Christ, a title derived from the Greek word meaning Messiah or Anointed One. The Christ of Christianity is Jesus of Nazareth, a man born between 7 and 4 B.C.E. in the region of Palestine. According to Christian teaching, Jesus was killed by Roman authorities using a form of execution called crucifixion (a term meaning he was nailed to a cross and hung from it until he died) in about the year 30 C.E. After his death, he rose back to life. His death and resurrection provide a way by which people can be reconciled with God. In remembrance of Jesus' death and resurrection, the cross serves as a fundamental symbol in Christianity.

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Self-denial during a period of intense religious devotion is a long-standing tradition in both the Eastern and Western churches. In the early days, Christians prepared for **EASTER** by fasting from **GOOD FRIDAY** until Easter morning. It wasn't until the ninth century that the Lenten season was fixed at forty days (with

Sundays omitted), perhaps reflecting the importance attached to the number: Moses went without food for forty days on Mount Sinai, the children of Israel wandered for forty years, Elijah fasted for forty days, and so did Jesus, who also spent forty hours in his tomb.

“Lent” comes from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “spring” or “lengthening days.” It is a period of self-examination and repentance in preparation for Easter and a time to strengthen one’s faith in God through repentance and prayer. Lent has been observed for centuries with periods of strict FASTING, abstinence from meat (and in the East, from dairy products, wine, and olive oil as well), additional prayer services, and other penitential activities. It is customary for modern-day Christians to “give up something for Lent” —a favorite food or other worldly pleasure. It is also customary for the church organs to remain silent during this period, and for weddings and other celebrations to be prohibited.

Although the observation of Lent is usually associated with Roman Catholics, Protestant churches also observe Lent. Most offer Holy Communion on each of the Sundays during Lent, and some organize special Bible study classes for children and adults. Many churches set aside Sunday evenings during Lent for performances of cantatas, oratorios, and other Lenten music.

SYMBOLS AND CUSTOMS

Birch Branches

In Sweden, the Lenten season is called Fastlagen. It falls at a time of year when the ground is still frozen and the trees are bare. People cut birch branches and tie colored chicken or rooster feathers to the boughs. At one time, the decorated branches were used to beat one another, a cleansing ritual designed to get rid of anything evil or unholy. The custom of “birching” also served as a symbolic reminder of the beatings that Jesus received on his way to be crucified. Today, the branches are used to decorate windowsills.

Fasting

From the time of the Apostles, the church had singled out Friday as a weekly day of fast. In addition, many early Christians observed a strict two-day fast from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. Eventually a longer period of fasting was introduced in preparation for Easter, although its observance varied widely. Some churches fasted only during Holy Week, while others extended the fast for two or more weeks. Sunday was always an exception, and, in the Eastern church, so was Saturday. During the third and fourth centuries most churches adopted a forty-day fast in imitation of Christ, who had fasted for forty days in the wilderness after he was baptized.

Back in the days when there were no calendars to tell people how close they were to the end of the fasting period, they invented their own methods of keeping track of the time. One of these primitive calendars looked like a nun cut out of paper, with no mouth (symbolizing the abstention from food) and with her hands crossed in prayer. She had seven feet, all facing in the same direction. Every Saturday one of the feet was torn off, until the fast was over. Another approach, used in Greece, was to stick seven chicken feathers in a boiled potato or onion hanging from the ceiling by a string. A feather was removed as each week passed.

For nearly 1,000 years, the Catholic Church followed the fasting rules laid down by Pope Gregory the Great: no meat or animal products, such as milk, cheese, eggs, or butter. This is still the routine among members of the Eastern Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church in the United States. But a new ruling of the Ecumenical Council in Rome says that Catholics are obligated to fast on only two days during Lent: **ASH WEDNESDAY** and **GOOD FRIDAY**.

Lenten Fires

The custom of lighting fires on the first Sunday in Lent was widespread in Europe at one time and is still common in parts of Belgium, northern France, and Germany. Children go around collecting fuel and cutting down bushes for days in advance. The fires are lit in the evening, often by the individual who has most recently married. Young people sing and dance around the bonfire, leaping over the embers to guarantee a good harvest or a happy marriage within the year, or to guard themselves against colic. In some areas, torches are lit from the fire and carried into the surrounding orchards, gardens, and fields. Ashes from the torches may be shaken on the ground or put in hens' nests so there will be plenty of eggs. In Switzerland, where the first Sunday in Lent is known as Spark Sunday, a "witch"—usually made from old clothes and fastened to a pole—is stuck in the middle of the fire. Sometimes old wheels are wrapped in straw and thorns, lit on fire, and sent rolling down a nearby hill.

There is an old peasant saying that neglecting to kindle the fire on the first Sunday in Lent means that God will light it himself—i.e., that he will burn the house down. It was common at one time to roast cats alive over the Lenten fires. The cats symbolized the devil, who could never be put through too much suffering.

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WEB SITES

Christian Resource Institute in Warr Acres, Oklahoma
www.cresourcei.org/cylent.html

New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia
www.newadvent.org/cathen/09152a.htm



Li Ch'un

Type of Holiday: Calendar/Seasonal

Date of Observation: Early February

Where Celebrated: China, and by Chinese communities throughout the world

Symbols and Customs: Meng Shan, Ox

Colors: Five colors are associated with Li Ch'un: black, white, red, green, and yellow. They represent the five elements (fire, water, metal, wood, earth), the five planets that rule the elements (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn), the five kinds of grain grown in China, and the five kinds of weather conditions (*see* OX).

Related Holidays: Chinese New Year, Ching Ming