Why Does the Great Fast Start on Monday and not Wednesday?

This article was published on www.eeparchy.com

Well. I know why we Byzantine Catholics start on Monday, but I didn’t know why Roman Catholics start on Wednesday. Till now. The easiest way to explain this is to draw it out, so I made us all a calendar on the next page. First, let’s explain what I understand well. Byzantine Catholics (that’s us) start the season of the Great Fast 40 days before Holy Week. This first day is called “Clean Monday”, and technically it starts at sundown on Sunday evening. Why? Because the Church always starts the new day at sundown (not midnight like the civic calendar does). Holy Week is the 8 days before Pascha where we live out liturgically the passion of Jesus. (Pascha is the Eastern way of saying Easter.) It starts on Lazarus Saturday where during the Liturgy we read the gospel about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and continues to Great and Holy Saturday where Jesus descends into death to begin a glorious exit with his beloved people. Before the Great Fast (which Latin Rite Christians call Lent) we have 4 weeks of Pre-Lent. This is kicked off right after the church reads the gospel about Zacchaeus. This is meant to be a time of preparation for the fast (because it’s hard to start cold turkey). So with this knowledge in hand, how do we Byzantines find the date for the Great Fast to start? Well, the first thing we need to do is figure out the date of Easter. Of course, the date of Easter changes every year because Easter falls each year on the first Sunday, after the first full moon, after the Spring Equinox. (This year (2021) the full moon is on March 28.) But thankfully the days of the week stay the same every year. Easter Sunday will always take place on a Sunday, Good Friday on a Friday, and Forgiveness Monday on a Monday. Once we find the date of Easter Sunday, then we simply count backwards for the 8 days of Holy Week, and another 40 more for Clean Monday. On the calendar on the next page this is all laid out for you. The names of the days as we call them in the Byzantine Church are in Black. The numbering of the 40 days of the Fast are in red.

Now for the tricky part. Trying to explain something that wasn’t clear to me: Almost everyone I’ve asked has a different theory as to why Western Christians (including Roman Catholics) start on the day they call “Ash Wednesday”. Even when I look it up on Catholic websites I get several answers. Here is one of them which explains some common theories:

#### “When does Lent begin?”

Traditionally, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends at sundown on Holy Thursday. Since this is more than forty days, some contend that Sundays are not counted in Lent. Instead, they argue, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday are counted instead. Others say that Lent begins on the first Sunday after Ash Wednesday. No one is exactly sure how Ash Wednesday became the first day of Lent.
<https://www.aboutcatholics.com/beliefs/lent-in-the-catholic-church/>  (as of Saturday, Feb 13)

I have asked many Roman Catholic clergy over the years also and the answers I got were likewise mixed. The second funniest and most humble answer I ever got was: “Roman Catholics simply didn’t count very well back when they made the calendar.” But as of today (Saturday) I have asked an RC priest who actually could give me a little more history. Here is the answer from Fr. Sylvain Casavant:



So there you have it. We don’t know exactly why but hundreds of years ago Roman Catholics added four extra days to the beginning of their Lent. (Maybe some scholar somewhere knows why.) Roman Catholics now start their Lent on Ash Wednesday and go till Holy Thursday, a total of 44 days (or 43 if you don’t count Holy Thursday). We Byzantine Catholics start on Clean Monday and go till “Holy Week”, a total of 40 days. Holy Week then lasts for another 8 days till the great feast of Pascha. Yay! We are smarter now! Whether you are Roman Catholic or a Byzantine Catholic may your Fasting journey be profound, and may we reach the Feast of the Resurrection as holier people.

