



A Forgotten Fast That Can Renew Your Spiritual Life Today

When we think of Lent, almost all of us immediately picture the forty days preceding Easter: Ash Wednesday, fasting, penance, conversion of heart. But what many people do not know is that, for centuries, our Christian ancestors lived **another Lent**, shorter but no less intense, deeply rooted in the liturgical and spiritual life of the Church: **the Lent of Saint Martin**, also known as the *Advent fast*.

Rediscovering it is not an exercise in nostalgia, but a providential opportunity to **recover the sense of waiting, sobriety, and interior preparation** in a world that has turned Advent into a long consumerist prelude to Christmas.

What Was the Lent of Saint Martin?

The so-called *Lent of Saint Martin* traditionally began **the day after the feast of Saint Martin of Tours (November 11)** and lasted until Christmas. In many places it extended for **forty days**, deliberately mirroring the Paschal Lent.

This was neither a late invention nor a marginal practice. From at least the 5th century onward, especially in **Gaul, Hispania, Italy, and parts of the monastic world**, Christians lived this time as a **period of fasting, penance, and spiritual preparation** for the coming of the Lord.

Saint Martin of Tours—soldier turned monk and later bishop—embodied a very concrete Christian ideal: **renunciation, radical charity, and an austere life**. His figure became a model for preparing the heart before the great mystery of the Incarnation.

Advent: Joyful Waiting... but Also Penitential

Today we tend to describe Advent exclusively as a “joyful” season. And it is. But for centuries, the Church understood that **there is no true Christian joy without prior conversion**.

Traditional Advent had a **dual character**:



- **Joyful hope** for the coming of the Messiah
- **Humble penance** rooted in the need to prepare the soul

Something very similar to what Saint John the Baptist—central figure of Advent—proclaims:

| *“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths” (Luke 3:4)*

Preparing the way does not mean decorating the house or starting Christmas carols in November. It means **straightening the heart**, removing interior obstacles, recognizing sin, and returning to God.

Fasting, Sobriety, and Daily Life

The Lent of Saint Martin involved very concrete practices:

- **Fasting** (especially on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays)
- **Abstinence from meat**
- **More intense prayer**
- **Limiting celebrations and banquets**
- **Greater attention to the poor**

This was not a disembodied spirituality. Quite the opposite: it affected the table, the social calendar, the rhythm of the household. Faith **ordered daily life**.

Here lies a very contemporary lesson: our ancestors understood that **the body educates the soul**. Reducing, simplifying, abstaining—not to punish oneself, but to **expand the desire for God**.

As the prophet Joel says:

| *“Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning” (Joel 2:12)*



Why Was This Practice Lost?

The reasons are multiple:

1. **Gradual relaxation of penitential disciplines**
2. **Cultural change**: winter shifted from a time of recollection to a season of festivities
3. **Secularization of Christmas**, increasingly focused on the external
4. **Liturgical ignorance**, even among practicing Catholics

The result is paradoxical: we arrive at Christmas **exhausted, saturated, and distracted**, when we should be **watchful, sober, and full of hope**.

The Deep Theological Relevance of This “Forgotten Lent”

The Lent of Saint Martin reminds us of something essential: **God is coming**, and His coming always demands preparation.

Advent does not look only to the Child in Bethlehem. It also looks to:

- **Christ’s coming in history**
- **His sacramental coming**
- And **His glorious coming at the end of time**

That is why the Church places such serious words on our lips during this season:

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour”
(Matthew 25:13)

Penance is not sadness; it is **spiritual lucidity**. It awakens us from the world’s drowsiness.



Does the Lent of Saint Martin Make Sense Today?

More than ever.

In a noisy, accelerated society saturated with stimuli, **returning to a spirituality of waiting and sobriety is deeply countercultural—and deeply Christian.**

This is not about imposing impossible burdens, but about **recovering the spirit** of this tradition.

Some Practical Applications for Today

- **Reducing consumption** during Advent (shopping, entertainment, social media)
- **Introducing small weekly fasts**
- **Praying daily with the Advent readings**
- **Going to confession before Christmas**, not after
- **Practicing concrete acts of almsgiving**
- **Recovering silence**, especially at home

Small gestures, lived consistently, can profoundly transform the way we celebrate Christmas.

Preparing the Manger... Inside the Heart

Our ancestors knew something we have forgotten: **Christ cannot be welcomed worthily if the heart is full of noise.**

Saint Bernard expressed it with disarming clarity:

“What good is it that Christ was born once in Bethlehem if He is not born every day in your heart?”

The Lent of Saint Martin is not an archaeological relic of the faith. It is an **urgent call to recover the spiritual depth of Advent**, to live Christmas not merely as a beautiful memory, but as an event that converts us.



Conclusion: A Tradition Waiting to Be Rediscovered

Perhaps we do not live exactly as our ancestors did. But their spiritual wisdom remains valid. They knew how to wait. They knew how to prepare. They knew that **God is not received casually.**

Rediscovering the Lent of Saint Martin is, at its core, **learning once again how to wait for God.**

And perhaps, if we do, Christmas will once again become what it always was:
not passing noise,
but **the silent irruption of God into the heart of man.**