

Thoughts for an *Extraordinary* Septuagesima

Name: The season “Septuagesima” is named after the first of the three Sundays of this season (which is also known as “Pre-Lent”). The names of these Sundays are: Septuagesima Sunday, Sexagesima Sunday, and Quinquagesima Sunday. These Latin names mean respectively 70th (“day” being implied), 60th (day), and 50th (day). These names continue the theme used to name the following liturgical season, *Quadragesima* (or Lent in English), which means 40th (day). The name “*Quadragesima*” will be treated in the write-up for Lent. Below are two ways of looking at the significance of the numerical values attached to the three Sundays of Septuagesima.

First, based on the numerical count associated with each of these Sundays, there are 50 days inclusively (including Sundays) between Quinquagesima Sunday and Easter Sunday, 60 days inclusively (including Sundays) between Sexagesima Sunday and Easter Wednesday, and 70 days inclusively (including Sundays) between Septuagesima Sunday and Easter Saturday. Thus the counts from Septuagesima Sunday, Sexagesima Sunday, and Quinquagesima Sunday bring us to the end of Easter Week, the middle of Easter Week, and the start of Easter Week respectively. The 40 days from Ash Wednesday (not counting the Sundays) bring us to Holy Saturday and the Easter Vigil. The little outline below gives a summary of what has just been discussed.

- Septuagesima Sunday → 70 Days (inclusive counting and counting Sundays) → Easter Saturday
- Sexagesima Sunday → 60 Days (inclusive counting and counting Sundays) → Easter Wednesday
- Quinquagesima Sunday → 50 Days (inclusive counting and counting Sundays) → Easter Sunday
- Ash Wednesday → 40 Days (inclusive counting and not counting Sundays) → Holy Saturday & Easter Vigil

Viewed in another light, the names of Septuagesima Sunday, Sexagesima Sunday, and Quinquagesima Sunday can be seen as relating to the decades of days (groups of 10 days) counted back from Easter Sunday (the first day of the first decade is Easter Sunday itself, Holy Saturday is the second day in the first decade, and so on). As Quinquagesima Sunday is the 50th day inclusively (counting Sundays) from Easter Sunday, it is part of and the conclusion of the 5th decade of days from Easter. Sexagesima Sunday falls within the 6th decade of days from Easter Sunday and is given the name of the day which closes the decade, namely the 60th (day from Easter). In the same way, Septuagesima Sunday is part of the 7th decade of days from Easter Sunday and is given the name of the day which closes the decade, namely the 70th (day from Easter).

Themes: The season of Septuagesima is set aside as a season of preparation for Lent and for the reception of ashes on Ash Wednesday. We are invited by the Liturgy to contemplate the misery of fallen humanity and the fatal consequences of original and actual sin. The Fall (original sin), the Flood (resulting from the malice of actual sin), and the Sacrifice of Melchisedech (a foreshadowing of the Sacrifice of Christ by which He worked our salvation from sin) are presented in the Matins readings over the course of the season. The Gospels and Epistles of the Sundays also touch on the themes of the Passion, salvation, and the necessity of penance. The season also serves as a transition period from the joys of Christmastide to the austerities of Lent.

The numerical value associated with the name of this season, 70, brings to mind the 70 years of exile the Hebrews endured in Babylon. This serves as a reminder that we, too, are living exiled from our heavenly home and invites us to sever our inordinate attachments to the things of this world so that we can seek after those of our true Homeland.

This multiple of 7 also calls to mind the Seven Ages of the World which, according to the ancient Christian tradition, are as follows:

1. The time from the creation of Adam to Noah
2. The time from Noah and the renovation of the earth by the flood to the calling of Abraham
3. The time from Abraham to Moses
4. The period between Moses and David
5. The years which passed between David's reign and the captivity of Babylon, inclusively
6. The return of the Jews to Jerusalem to the birth and life of Our Savior
7. From Christ's Resurrection to His Second Coming

The 8th and Final Age is that which follows the General Resurrection and the Last Judgement.

Length of Septuagesima: 17 days including Sundays.

Shrovetide and Forty Hours: "Shrovetide" refers to the three last three days of Septuagesima (Quinquagesima Sunday and the following Monday and Tuesday). The English terms "shrove" and "Shrovetide" come from the verb "to shrive," which means "to hear confessions." It was a traditional practice to confess one's sins before the start of Lent. These are also the final days of Carnival (derived from the Latin "*carnem levare*," "taking away of flesh/meat"). Tuesday of Shrovetide, Shrove Tuesday, is also called "Mardi Gras" (French for "Fat Tuesday") or "Pancake Tuesday" because fats, eggs, and butter in the house had to be used up before Lent began (when the Lenten fasting laws were stricter), and making pancakes or waffles was a good way to do it (this also helps explain the practice of the Easter egg). Unfortunately, the innocent merrymaking kept during this time before entering the exercises of Lent was corrupted by a general excess. In order to provide a pious alternative and to make reparation for these excesses, the Church instituted for this time the Forty Hours Devotion (forty hours of Eucharistic Exposition and Adoration).

Gloria?: Only on feast days. The intermittent absence of the *Gloria* is a foretaste of its prolonged absence during Lent.

Alleluia?: At the conclusion of First Vespers of Septuagesima Sunday (the Saturday night before), the Easter *Benedicamus* with double *Alleluia* is Sung (see below).

