

The Season of Lent

A Journey to Holiness

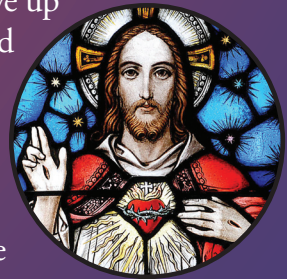
*Go and learn the meaning of the words,
"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."
—Matthew 9:13*

Each year when we start thinking about Lent, we often seem initially drawn to the concepts of sacrifice and self-denial. These issues are significant, but they are neither the starting point nor the end of the season. The goal of Lent, in fact, is quite the opposite. Lent is first and foremost a time, not for diminishment, but for growth and development. We should aspire to expand our hearts, enlarge our souls, and enrich our minds. Perhaps the meaning of the Lord's words is this—God prefers a full heart to an empty stomach.

The First Goal of Lent

*I came so that they might have life
and have it more abundantly. —John 10:10*

The first question we often ask is, "what should I give up for Lent?" Perhaps instead we might begin by asking: "What do I need for Lent?" or "What is missing from my life?" The first goal of Lent is holiness and the meaning of holiness is wholeness. Such holiness is measured, not by the scale of our deprivation, but by the fullness of our life in Christ. Lent is a time to seek the real gifts we lack: patience, joy, trust, and compassion. True blessedness does not arrive by denying our craving for chocolate, but by fulfilling our hunger for righteousness.



The Tools of Lent

*You are anxious and worried about many things.
There is need of only one thing.
—Luke 10:41-42*

Once we determine what we lack, only then do we turn to the question of self-denial. The human heart and soul are much like our computers and garages; they fill up with junk very quickly. The role of self-sacrifice is to discard the superfluous in order to clear a space for life's real treasures. We live in a culture that is often distracted by noise, materialism, and self-absorption. We use the three disciplinary tools of Lent—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving—to open our hearts and minds to others and to make room in our lives for God.



A Holistic Approach to Lent

The Three Basic Lenten Disciplines

Prayer

Balance your spiritual life by integrating the body, mind, and soul in your prayer life. Increase the quality, not the quantity of your prayer. Enhance meditative prayer by “unplugging” from the modern distractions. Create spaces where God’s voice can be heard. For more active or external prayer, keep a journal, read the psalms aloud, or sing the sacred music from your worship. Let your body express your prayer by trying Yoga, Tai Chi, or dance.



Fasting

Use your fasting, not to impress God with your discomfort, but to feed on the gifts for which you hunger most. Let your fasting serve the lives of others as well as your own. It does little good to give up dessert, but then to grumble at your children’s need for attention. Fast from some of your private pursuits to become food for your family and friends. Fast from anger, blame, and entitlement; feast on forgiveness, affirmation, and the common good.



Almsgiving

Connect your almsgiving to your fasting so that self-denial becomes other-enhancement. If you skip a daily latte, give the money to a local food bank. If you have limited financial means, supplement your alms by giving of your time and talent. Volunteer at a soup kitchen or become a minister of care at your parish. Let your own poverty, whatever it may be, enrich the lives of others. Give generously, not just from the leftovers, but from the “first fruits” of your table.



Lenten Regulations for Fasting and Abstinence

The Church teaches that Catholics in good health are to observe the following practices during Lent unless for some serious reason they are unable to do so:

Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 are obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. In addition, all Catholics 14 years old and older must abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and all the Fridays of Lent.

Fasting as explained by the U.S. bishops means partaking of only one full meal and two smaller meals that do not equal the main meal. Abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, milk products or condiments made of animal fat.

The Symbols of Lent

Color: *Violet* (purple) is the usual color for Lent, symbolizing repentance and prayerful reflection. *Red* on Good Friday relates to Jesus sacrifice, while *white* is the color for Easter.

Ashes placed on the forehead hint at an ancient ritual-covering oneself with ashes in penitence. Receiving the cross-shaped “smudge” reminds us that we are dust and is a public statement of repentance.

The **Forty Days** of Lent parallel the 40 days which Jesus spent in fasting and prayer in the wilderness (among many “40” references in the Bible). Sundays *are not* counted as days of Lent. Good Friday and Easter Vigil, while technically not in Lent, *are* counted as part of the 40 days.

Palm branches in ancient times signified victory and were used in triumphal processions by Romans and Jews.

Stations of the Cross: In the early Church, Christians would make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to retrace the steps of Jesus on his way to the cross. As the Church grew, such a pilgrimage became unrealistic and a tradition was born to retrace the steps of Jesus by reflecting on pictures that depicted those steps. During Lent, especially on Fridays, Catholics reflect on the crucifixion of Jesus by praying the Stations of the Cross, which has become a time-honored tradition.

Readings for Lent 2019

Ash Wednesday Jl 2:12-18 • 2 Cor 5:20—6:2 • Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

1st Sunday Dt 26:4-10 • Rom 10:8-13 • Lk 4:1-13

2nd Sunday Gn 15:5-12, 17-18 • Phil 3:17—4:1 • Lk 9:28b-36

3rd Sunday Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15 • 1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12 • Lk 13:1-9

4th Sunday Jos 5:9a, 10-12 • 2 Cor 5:17-21 • Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

5th Sunday Is 43:16-21 • Phil 3:8-14 • Jn 8:1-11

Palm Sunday Lk 19:28-40 • Is 50:4-7 • Phil 2:6-11
• Lk 22:14—23:56

Holy Thursday Ex 12:1-8, 11-14 • 1 Cor 11:23-26 • Jn 13:1-15

Good Friday Is 52:13—53:12 • Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9
• Jn 18:1—19:42

Easter Vigil Gn 1:1—2:2 • Gn 22:1-18 • Ex 14:15—15:1
• Is 54:5-14 • Is 55:1-11 • Bar 3:9-15, 32—4:4
• Ez 36:16-17a, 18-28 • Rom 6:3-11 • Lk 24:1-12