

# Journey of Faith



## In Short:

- Lent was originally a period of preparation for baptism.
- Lenten themes include repentance, sacrifice, and spiritual growth.
- Three traditional Lenten practices are fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.



## Living Lent

We take time to prepare for things that are important to us. During Lent, we prepare for the greatest celebration of the Church year—Easter. We follow the path of Jesus, who journeyed through death to resurrection. We die to ourselves so that we, like Jesus, might rise again.

Lent is a time of preparation, a time of spiritual growth. We discard our faulty attitudes and unhealthy habits. We pick up new attitudes and fresh perspectives. The dying and rebirth that take place within our hearts reflect the paschal mystery—the suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord.

The word *Lent* comes from an early English word that refers to the lengthening of daylight hours during spring. While the season of Lent was originally a time of final preparation for those adults being baptized at Easter, the entire Church now enters into the spirit and practices of Lent.



Beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending before the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, Lent is a period of about forty days, not counting Sundays. It's a penitential season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving in preparation for the celebration of Easter.

Lent is a good time to ask yourself:

- *What do I need to be happy?*
- *How do I spend my time, energy, money? What does this tell me about my priorities?*
- *Do I have unhealthy habits that pull me away from God?*

For catechumens and candidates, Lent is a time of purification and enlightenment, a time to respond to God with greater reflection and commitment.

## Body, Mind, and Spirit

The season of Lent speaks to the whole person by appealing not only to the mind and spirit but also to the senses:

**Ashes.** The ashes we receive on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday remind us of the passage of time and our constant need of repentance. Wearing ashes on our foreheads indicates our willingness to do penance for our sins.

**Violet.** The color of the clergy's vestments and church decorations during Lent symbolizes repentance, reflection, and conversion.

**Palms.** On the Sunday before Easter, *Palm Sunday* of the Passion of the Lord, we carry palm branches in imitation of those who honored Jesus by throwing palm branches in his path as he rode into Jerusalem.

Our experience of Lent begins with ashes and words that call us to repentance. The symbols and practices of Lent assist us on our path of conversion. Lent prepares us to sing "Alleluia" to our risen Lord at Easter.

## Why Forty Days?

The number forty has a symbolic meaning in Scripture and occurs in both the Old and New Testaments (see Genesis 7:17–18, Exodus 34:27–29, Deuteronomy 8:2–3, Matthew 4:1–4, Acts 1:1–5).

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that Jesus spent forty days in the desert after his baptism in the Jordan River: "Jesus...was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil" (Luke 4:1–2). The story of Jesus' temptation in the desert is always the Gospel reading on the first Sunday of Lent.

Jesus' desert experience reminds us of the Israelites who were freed from slavery in Egypt only to wander in the desert for forty years on their way to the Promised Land. During that time, they were tempted to sin and turned away from God.

Jesus reversed the Israelites' failure to stay faithful to God. When the devil tempted him, Jesus didn't give in. He resisted the devil's temptations, the same temptations the Israelites had faced in the desert.

- What tempts you to turn your heart away from God?



Historically, Lent was a time when people did public penance (prayers or actions that express sorrow for sin) to be reconciled with the Church. At the beginning of Lent, the bishop placed ashes on those seeking forgiveness and gave them a public penance to perform. Then at Easter, they were welcomed back to the Eucharist as fully reconciled members of the Church. Today, most parishes provide additional opportunities for celebrating the sacrament of penance and reconciliation.

*"My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a contrite, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn."*

Psalm 51:19

Lenten practices that express our repentance are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

*"Prayer for the good of the soul. Fasting for the good of the body. Almsgiving for the good of our neighbor."*

Gertrude Mueller Nelson

## Prayer

In a sense, Lent is a desert experience for each of us. It's a time to step away from the world and reflect in prayer. It's important to take time to reflect on how we're living our faith and prepare our hearts to hear God's voice so we may respond to his call. Turning our hearts toward God prepares us to take part in the celebration of Easter.

Lent is a time to refocus and strengthen our prayer efforts. If we've been lazy or inconsistent in prayer, Lent is a good time to commit to making a stronger and more regular effort. We may choose to lengthen the time we spend in prayer, try a different prayer form, read the daily Mass readings, pray the rosary or Way of the Cross, or attend daily Mass. Reading a spiritual book may help lead us to a richer prayer experience. Our improved prayer habits may spill over into the Easter season and beyond.

- How will you increase or improve your time in prayer this Lent?



## Fasting

Fasting for religious purposes is a practice of self-discipline as old as the people of God (see 1 Samuel 7:5–16, 1 Kings 21:25–29, Joel 2:12–13, Acts 13:2–3, Acts 14:23). It's an aid to concentration in prayer and a help in refocusing our attention on God. Like other spiritual disciplines, fasting needs to be done in the right spirit and with an open heart.

The Church teaches that **fasting** (limiting the amount of food we eat) and **abstinence** (doing without certain foods) must be combined with prayer and works of charity and other acts of mercy:

*"Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh?"*

Isaiah 58:6–7

All Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence for those age fourteen and older. Most people abstain from eating meat, but other meaningful sacrifices may be substituted.

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are required days of *fasting and abstinence* for those between the ages of eighteen and fifty-nine. When *fasting*, a person is permitted to eat one full meal, as well as two smaller meals that together don't equal a full meal. A person's age, health condition, and degree of physical labor will affect how strictly they're obliged to fast.

*"When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to others to be fasting."*

Matthew 6:17–18

- What value do you see in fasting and abstaining from meat? How much of a sacrifice will this be for you?
- How might fasting and abstinence make you more conscious of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice for our sins? More conscious of those who regularly do without?



## Sacrifice and Almsgiving

Our prayer and fasting should lead to sacrifice and **almsgiving** (money or goods given as charity to the poor) and other acts of mercy.

### What Jesus Says About Sacrifice

Jesus requires his disciples to make sacrifices in order to follow him:

- Matthew 19:21: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."
- Mark 8:34: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."
- Luke 14:27, 33: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.... Everyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple."



- What is your cross? Will you carry your cross halfheartedly or wholeheartedly?

Members of the early Christian community in Jerusalem gave up ownership of their goods to support the community:

*"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need."*

Acts 2:44–45



Offering up sacrifices during Lent is a reminder that all of our trials and suffering can be united with the suffering of Jesus and offered up in thanksgiving for his great sacrifice:

*"If only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him."*

Romans 8:17

- How will I refocus my life on God this Lent?



When we give something up, our goal is to focus our attention on God and bring him and his concerns back to the center of our lives. Sometimes we discover we need to give something up; other times we may need to do something additional. Through our sacrifices and almsgiving (gifts of charity to the needy), we unite in solidarity with those who regularly do without.

*"Giving alms to the poor is a witness to fraternal charity: it is a work of justice pleasing to God."*

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*"Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise."*

Luke 3:11



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