

Lent on a Lake

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This is Lago Trasimeno, the fourth largest lake in Italy. It is about 20 km west of Perugia and 40 km west of Assisi. It is grand with two islands and some of the freshest fish in all of Umbria. I share this with you so you have some idea of where St. Francis once spent all of Lent alone. This version of the story is from *The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions* by Ugolino Boniscambi of Montegiorgio, dated the early 1300's. Some Franciscan scholars believe Francis did this in 1211. The core of this story, I believe, is the willingness of Francis to enter fully into the Season of Repentance.

At one time when Saint Francis was near the Lake of Perugia, he was at Mardi Gras as guest of a man devoted to him. Francis asked his host to take him for the love of God to an island on the lake where no one lived and to do so during the night of Ash Wednesday so no one would know about it. The man prepared his little boat at night and transported Francis to the island. Francis brought nothing for food except two small loaves of bread. After he reached the island, he asked his ferryman to tell no one and to come back for him on Holy Thursday. Since there was no shelter there where he could rest, he crawled into a dense thicket where thorn bushes had formed an enclosure, and he stayed there immobile for the whole forty days, neither eating or drinking.

His host came looking for him, as they had agreed, on Holy Thursday and he found that, except for part of one, the two little loaves of bread had not been touched. It is believed that Saint Francis ate part of one loaf so that with a little bread he would expel the poison of vainglory and thus the glory of a forty day fast be reserved for the Blessed Christ. Yet he did fast forty days and forty nights after the example of Christ.

In that place where Saint Francis did such remarkable penance, many miracles were performed through his merits. Therefore, people began to build and live on this island, and in a short period of time a large village and a house for friars were established there. The people of this village still show great reverence for that place where Saint Francis kept the Lenten fast.

As with many medieval stories, this one written nearly one hundred years after the death of Francis has a few inconsistencies. Just three days without water can be deadly; but the author lets us know that Francis was more than sincere in his effort to truly fast for forty days. I might suggest that you don't follow his example precisely in your own Lenten journey. However, I'm willing to guess that we can all learn something from "Lent on a Lake" and how to sincerely enter into what the Order of Christian Initiation calls the Period of Purification and Enlightenment.

In Chicago one of my favorite things to take advantage of is Lake Michigan, which is vastly larger than Trasimeno. I discovered long ago that I can make the entire city of Chicago disappear! Walk out to the very end of Navy Pier and sit on a bench out there. You are alone but for a few tourists (none early in the morning) and sea gulls. Alone! I don't know about you but as a relatively high extrovert, I've learned to cherish moments when no one else is around – balance out that bit of introvert in me. Whether it's a friar with a medical problem or another homily to prepare or finding a sub cook in the friary, I love the moments my role as guardian leaves and it's just God and Bob. I actually love to drive too because I can be alone. You may be surprised that I, a professional musician, seldom listen to the radio in a car, especially on long drives. God and Bob.

Back to Francis...he frequently embraced medieval piety and spiritual customs and discovered more than one period of fasting during the year. For example, he embraced the Lent of St. Michael. This was a period of 40 days from the Assumption, August 15, to the Feast of St. Michael, September 29. In 1224 Francis spent this Lent of St. Michael high atop Mount La Verna in Tuscany. It was during this period that Francis experienced the Stigmata. He'd been away from his companion friars and entered a period of intense prayer in seclusion. Leo found Francis in the forest and he'd been transformed into a living crucifix. El Greco's painting of Francis alone [at right] conveys some of the intensity each of us can also experience. But how in 2026?



iPhones have a feature called 'screen time' and it records how many hours one is using the phone. I've known people who were on it (for many reasons) 12 hours in one day! Half the day on a screen! I know few of us are willing to get rid of cell phones; however we can at least consider other ways of spending the gift of time, especially in Lent, when we are called to make more room in our hearts for God through prayer, fasting and alms giving.

When I have a person in spiritual direction who wants to learn contemplative prayer, I encourage him or her to begin slowly. Ten or even five minutes can seem like an hour to some. One has to learn self-emptying, the art of getting rid of thoughts about the day's events or tasks to do; because our brains and hearts are so often overloaded with 'stuff' it takes time to empty that clutter. Hence, go slowly. Turn the phone, radio and television off and simply say something like "Lord, I give myself to you and the quiet now." Don't focus on you or others or that 'stuff'. Choose a place at home that's just for prayer. Rather than use words, let the Lord enter your heart and simply be together, grateful for this holy time.

There are many, many forms of prayer and it's important to find forms that appeal to us. People often ask why the prayers they've recited every day for years seem empty or "just don't mean what they used to mean." That can be a realization that it may be time to change and grow in how one prays. It doesn't mean that a former style wasn't good; I believe we all grow and change in every aspect of our lives. But when it comes to expressing our hearts, some have a propensity to pull away from changing, thinking it's wrong to drop the Rosary or whatever. I need a new prescription for my glasses every so often, need a new pair of pants or washing machine or.....what's wrong with trying a new form of prayer that honestly expresses my faith at this point in my life? Prayer is being with God, not an exercise or source of futility or pain. Being with God is pure delight.

Chapter 7, ¶94 of *A Mirror of Perfection*, Sabatier Edition: “*Blessed Francis always had this as his highest and main goal: constantly to have in himself spiritual joy, internally and externally, outside the times of prayer and divine office. This is what he especially liked in his brothers, and he would, moreover, frequently rebuke them because of their sadness and acedia.*” Two things here: Francis engendered in his friars a certain happiness and fundamental joy in their vocation, even during periods of darkness. Joy is not Snoopy dancing with abandon; spiritual joy, I believe, is a certain confidence that colors every minute of my day. I am confident that God is right next to me, even on those days when I feel smothered by that classic ‘stuff’! Joy in young friars is exactly the characteristic of the Order that made me want to join: I wanted to share their joy and happiness! Acedia’s causes stem from spiritual disaffection, a profound lack of care, boredom, and spiritual inertia, often manifesting as restlessness, apathy, or even depression, fueled by neglecting spiritual practices, self-centeredness, distractions (like modern technology), and a failure to find joy in God’s gifts or one’s duties, making even good things feel meaningless. You might consider during Lent to do a self-inventory and see if there is underlying joy in your heart and prayer. Or discern if you are bored, lackadaisical in prayer or plagued by acedia. I hope you see there are ways and means to renew and refresh one’s prayer life. Again, the OCIA refers to Lent as the Period of Purification and Enlightenment so let the Light in and allow your heart to be purified by Christ Jesus. I know that sounds nice and I know it takes time and effort. But hey – it’s your relationship with God and we only have one. Cherish, nourish, renew it with the Lord’s grace; He is masterful in reshaping our lives, believe me!



Back to Navy Pier and Lake Michigan. I captured this photo with my phone a few years ago. Simply the lighthouse, seawall and three colors! Fascinating, isn’t it? This kind of beauty is everywhere every day just for us. Beauty surrounds us; *Beauty Itself* was the ascription that St. Bonaventure gave to God. Look in your backyard if you have one for signs of new life and take those signs into your prayer. Hear your favorite music for the first time in years by dropping everything and focus on each note. If you’re a parent, embrace your child(ren) and see the image of God they are and will be. Come to St. Peter’s and just let your personal problems be assuaged

by our Silent Lord who loves each of us as we are in the moment. New life to your prayer!

Lent is a time for repentance, yes, but it doesn’t have to be painful. See the joy in my face as I watch the new confessionals in church take shape after dreaming and planning for 18 years! See the joy in your heart when prayer becomes a delight, not a task. Francis didn’t want to live with dour and boring brothers. God fills that occasional emptiness with tenderness regardless of our vocation. May God be with you and may you be confident of God’s embrace and forgiveness. We friars at St. Peter’s thank God for the support you offer in so many forms. Knowing we are together in the Body of Christ enables us to serve you and thousands of people with Franciscan joy. *Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm*

2026 IS THE 800TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF ST. FRANCIS. WATCH FOR SPECIAL EVENTS HERE AT ST. PETER’S DURING THIS HOLY YEAR AFTER EASTER.

St. Francis, our brother, you who, 800 years ago, went to meet Sister Death as a man of peace, intercede for us with the Lord. You who recognized true peace in the Crucifix of San Damiano, teach us to seek in Christ the source of all reconciliation that breaks down all walls. You who, unarmed, crossed the lines of war and misunderstanding, give us the courage to build bridges where the world erects borders. In this age marked by conflict and division, intercede for us that we may become artisans of peace: unarmed and disarming witnesses to the peace that comes from Christ. *Pope Leo XIV, January 7, 2026*