



Catholic
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Center

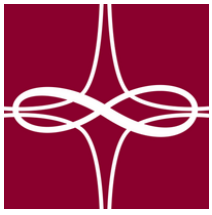
An Introduction to Lent

*A Time to Draw Closer to our
Crucified and Risen Lord*



A guide to
introduce you to
the Liturgical
Season of Lent
and how to make
the most of this
season





What is Lent?

The season of Lent gives us an opportunity to reflect upon the incredible mystery of God’s merciful love: “In the face of the darkness of sin and man’s incapacity to free himself on his own, there appears in all its splendor the saving work of Christ.” Motivated by his individual love for every person, Christ took upon himself the punishment we had earned by our sins, and by his suffering and death, he restored our relationship with God and offered us the gift of salvation. We accept that gift by being united to his death and resurrection - also called the Paschal Mystery - in the sacrament of baptism, which gives us the grace to die to sin and rise to new life in him.



However, deepening this union with the crucified and risen Christ is a lifelong process. We are still inclined to sin; thus, “it is only by the road of conversion that we can enter the Kingdom” (CCC 1470).



What Is Lent? - Continued

Lent is a time when we recognize not only God's redeeming love but also our need for this conversion: we acknowledge the ways in which, by our sin, we have said "no" to God and rejected or damaged the relationship which he died to restore. Moreover, our Lenten reflection on Christ's crucifixion shows us the effect of our sins upon the one who thirsts so ardently for our love. On Ash Wednesday, we hear the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" and receive ashes as a sign that we recognize our utter dependence on God's mercy and our need for repentance. The ashes are administered in the shape of a cross, reminding us that Lent is a time to unite ourselves ever more closely to Christ's cross, death, and resurrection. We can do this by dying to those habits or attachments which prevent us from loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind and loving our neighbor as ourselves (cf. Mt 22:37, 39).



By rejecting sin and imitating the self-emptying love of Christ, we draw closer to him in this life and prepare to live with him eternally in heaven. Furthermore, "[because] he has in some way united himself to every man, 'the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal Mystery' is offered to all men" (CCC 618). Thus, our sacrifices made in love, when united to Christ's, help obtain not only our own salvation but the salvation of the whole world.



Why Make Sacrifices During Lent?

Another way of understanding why and how we should unite ourselves with Christ's Paschal Mystery during Lent can be found in the scriptural image of following the Lord into the desert. The story of the Israelites' forty years in the desert reveals how a period of sacrifice can enable us to overcome sin and practice self-control, both of which bring about that which is most important: a restored and deepened relationship with God. Imagine standing in the midst of a vast desert—it has a mysterious grandeur that speaks of God, but its utter barrenness also leads you to seek him in your great need. By leading his chosen people out into the desert, God taught them to rely upon him for everything.

By making Lenten sacrifices that we find difficult, we too recognize our weakness and utter dependence upon God; thus, we turn back to him with the love and reverence which he is due. Just as deserts are empty places, Lent also provides us the opportunity to empty our lives of things and habits—even those which may not be sinful per se—which distract us from God and attempt to fill the hole in our hearts, the yearning which only he can satisfy. Separated from these things, we can finally recognize not only how much we need God but also how much we desire him. When we finally return to God with this renewed longing for his love, we can encounter him far more intimately and experience how he alone fully satisfies our desires.





Why Make Sacrifices During Lent? - Continued

It was in the desert that God first made his covenant of love with the Israelites. Later in the Old Testament, as Pope Francis recalls, “When [God’s] people distance themselves from him, becoming like an unfaithful wife, God says: ‘So I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart....She shall respond there as in the days of her youth’” (Hos 2:16-17).

Christ himself reveals the importance of this practice: he spent forty days in fasting and prayer in the desert before his public ministry began. There, he showed his solidarity with human weakness, experiencing hunger and temptations from the devil. Strengthened by his fasting and prayer, “Christ reveals himself as God's Servant, totally obedient to the divine will. In this, Jesus is the devil's conqueror...[His] victory over the tempter in the desert anticipates victory at the Passion” (CCC 539). Christ’s time in the desert offers hope and a model to mankind.





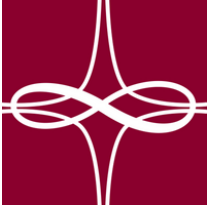
How Do We Celebrate Lent?



As we prepare for our Lenten days in the desert with the Lord, we should examine our lives and resolve to take up sacrificial practices which will distance us from our vices and attachments and cultivate the virtues we need. The Church also offers three practices, each rooted in Scripture, which should be foremost in our Lenten observance: fasting, almsgiving, and prayer.

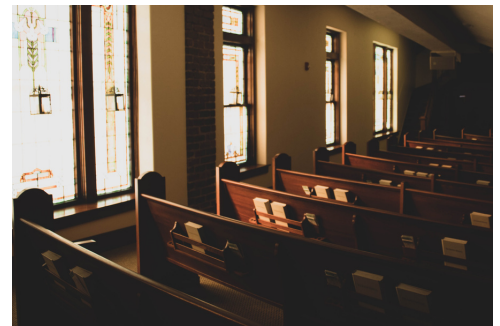
Fasting is a key way of practicing self-denial. Our hearts need to be strengthened like any other muscle, and when we fast, we practice self-restraint so that we can be more free to avoid evil and choose what is good in the future. Fasting is also a key way of practicing detachment. Christ teaches that “No one can serve two masters” (Mt 6:24): if lower goods have captured our hearts, we will not ardently yearn for higher ones. Thus, we do not fast because food or our bodies are evil, we fast so we can be more attentive to and desirous of the things of God.

As Pope John Paul II wrote, “As for true riches, those which do not pass away... We must long for them, we must hunger for them, putting aside what is artificial and passing, in order to receive these good things, and to receive them in abundance.”



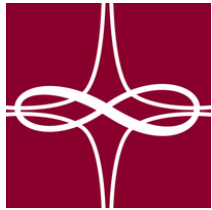
How Do We Celebrate Lent? - Continued

Almsgiving goes hand in hand with fasting because it is also “an exercise in self-denial to free us from attachment to worldly goods.” By this detachment, we are more free to turn our minds and hearts not only toward God but also toward our brothers and sisters, especially the most vulnerable. Fasting and almsgiving are sacrifices that unite us with those who hunger and suffer. This solidarity reminds us that we are all poor before God, and any spiritual or material goods we possess are his gifts which he has given in order that we might give them away. In this way, almsgiving becomes another means by which our hearts can be re-formed during Lent.



As Pope Francis has said, “Lent invites us to conversion, to a change in mindset, so that life’s truth and beauty may be found not so much in possessing as in giving, not so much in accumulating as in sowing and sharing goodness.” Almsgiving can be practiced by not only offering financial aid but also by offering one’s time to assist others. This is often a greater sacrifice but one that is more urgently needed. We can begin, in our own families and communities, by practicing the corporal works of mercy (feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead) and spiritual works of mercy (instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, admonish the sinner, bear wrongs patiently, forgive offenses willingly, comfort the afflicted, pray for the living and the dead).

The exact nature or size of our charitable acts does not matter as long as we are imitating the total, self-emptying love of Christ. As St. Teresa of Calcutta said, “A sacrifice to be real must cost, must hurt, and must empty ourselves.”



How Do We Celebrate Lent? - Continued



The third central Lenten practice is prayer. All Lenten observances have the goal of healing and deepening our love of God and neighbor, and prayer is the most essential way we cultivate our relationship with God. Lent provides us with a special opportunity for experiencing greater closeness to the Lord in prayer. Distanced from exterior and interior noise, we can hear God speaking more clearly in his word and in our hearts. Coming to him with a greater sense of need and desire, he rushes to fill us with his tenderness, wisdom, and strength. The Lord reveals himself in a particularly powerful way through his Passion, and thus meditating upon it—both privately and communally in a practice such as the Stations of the Cross—is a very fruitful form of Lenten prayer.

Finally, healing is an indispensable part of deepening our relationship with God. Such meditation upon Christ's Passion reveals the profound pain and sorrow that our sin inflicts upon God and others, but it also reveals that God's mercy is infinite and that he continues to thirst for our love no matter how far we have strayed. The more we encounter in prayer the gaze of Christ crucified, the more confidently we believe that God "does not close his heart to any of his children. He waits for them, looks for them, goes to meet them at the place where the refusal of communion imprisons them in isolation and division. He calls them to gather about his table in the joy of the feast of forgiveness and reconciliation." There is no better time than Lent to receive the pardon and peace that Christ longs to give in the sacrament of confession.

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