

THE CATHOLIC GUIDE



TO MAKING

Lent
MATTER

The Catholic Guide to Making Lent Matter

40 Days that Matter!

Lent lies at the very heart of our Catholic faith. Each year, on Ash Wednesday, we begin our Lenten retreat. We are blessed with ashes, reminding us that we are dust, and to dust we will return. For the next forty days we are led into the desert of our own hearts to look within, face our sins, and ask for God's mercy.

Forty days was chosen as the time of preparation because it was symbolic of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness before embarking on his public ministry — “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry” (Mt 4:1-2) — as well as in remembrance of the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the desert before entering the Promised Land.

Pope Francis has written: “Lent is a favorable season for deepening our spiritual life through the means of sanctification offered us by the Church: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. At the basis of everything is the word of God, which during this season we are invited to hear and ponder more deeply.”

Lent is a time of sacrifice and discipline, but it should not be a time of sadness. Instead it should be a season of great joy. The first Preface for the Mass in Lent clearly reminds us of this:

For by your gracious gift each year
your faithful await the sacred paschal feasts
with the joy of minds made pure.

As Christians we are stirring up our faith and love for God and one another so that, on Easter, we are ready to meet the risen Lord refreshed and restored.

The best Lent is one in which we enter the season wholeheartedly. All too often, people either take on too much or don't take on enough. The solution is to simplify our disciplines, focus our intentions, and concentrate more clearly on our spiritual goals.

This guide will give you lots of great information, ideas, and suggestions for making Lent matter more than ever!

Lent Backgrounder

The name “Lent” is from the Middle English Lenten and Anglo-Saxon Lenten, meaning spring; its more primitive ecclesiastical name was the “forty days,” tesseractoste in Greek. The number forty is first noted in the Canons of Nicaea (A.D. 325), likely in imitation of Jesus’ fast in the desert before his public ministry (with Old Testament precedent in Moses and Elijah). By the fourth century, in most of the West, it referred to six days’ fast per week of six weeks (Sundays were excluded); in the seventh century the days from Ash Wednesday through the First Sunday were added to make the number forty.

From Your Guide to a Catholic Lent, OSV.com

Why We Pray, Fast, and Give Alms

“Give alms ... pray to your Father ... fast, [but] do not look gloomy”
(see Mt 6:2-16).

Lent is the period of prayer and fasting leading up to the feast of Easter, recalling Jesus’ forty-day fast in the wilderness. The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends right before the evening Masses of Holy Thursday, although Lenten penance continues through Holy Saturday. During this penitential season, the Church calls all Catholics to spend more intentional time in prayer, as well as to fast and abstain from meat on designated days and to practice charitable giving.

Why Do We Pray?

As Catholics, we believe that personal prayer is not complete unless our prayers are joined with the community of faith who is the living Body of Christ. The Sunday liturgy is the greatest form of prayer because together we receive the gift of the holy Eucharist — the very real presence of the Risen Christ. Attending weekly (or daily) Mass is an essential part of a healthy prayer life.

Deepening Prayer

Throughout the season of Lent, we are called to deepen our prayer life. For some of us, this means beginning a habit of daily prayer, setting aside time each day to share our hopes, joys, fears, and frustrations with God. Praying first thing in the morning, while the house is still quiet, or talking to God while on your commute to work are simple ways to integrate prayer into everyday life. Praying the Rosary, visiting the Blessed Sacrament, or attending a daylong silent retreat may bring you to new places in your relationship with God.

Try this:

At the table during weekdays of Lent

Begin after a short silence. The leader alternates with the others who are present.

V. I was hungry.

R. And you gave me food.

V. I was thirsty.

R. And you gave me drink.

V. I was a stranger.

R. And you welcomed me.

V. I was naked.

R. And you clothed me.

V. I was ill.

R. And you comforted me.

V. I was in jail.

R. And you came to see me.

The leader prays:

Lord Jesus Christ,
may our Lenten fasting turn us
toward all our brothers and sisters who are
in need.

Bless this table, our good food, and ourselves.

Send us through Lent with good cheer,

and bring us to the fullness of your passover.

R. Amen.

From Catholic Prayers for All Occasions (Our Sunday Visitor, 2017)

Why Do We Fast?

Lent has traditionally been the season where we give something up, often sweets or a favorite food, in order to focus on the sacrifice Christ made on the cross. But fasting is much more than a means of developing self-control. Fasting is spiritual and physical purification; the pangs of hunger remind us of our hunger for God. Fasting and abstinence help us to participate more fully in the cross of Christ.

Fresh Ways to Fast

- In the Western world, fasting from food is a reminder of our abundance and a way to walk in solidarity with people around the world who struggle with daily hunger and starvation. Pause to remember families that face hunger as you fast.
- Limiting social-media exposure or fasting from the twenty-four-hour news networks are ways to quiet our minds and open our hearts to transformation.
- We might also strive to fast from anger, road rage, workaholism, judgment, or jealousy.

Lent is a time to fast from those things or habits that may have become a roadblock to our relationship with Christ.

Read this:

In the desert we cling to essentials

A trek into the desert wilderness is no simple matter. There are hazards, privations, and loneliness; uncertainties, fickle weather, wild animals, and the frightening prospect that overnight the wind could alter the landscape beyond recognition. Because such perils lurk in the wilderness, there are rules for those who dare set foot there, rules to be followed with the utmost seriousness: Do not go it alone; take water, and lots of it; carry a compass; and wear clothes that will accommodate the changing climate.

Those who follow the rules and those who don't soon discover that the wilderness is no place for joking around, that the rumors of danger are not rumors at all but the voice of experience. It is easy to lose one's way in the wilderness.

After his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert, where after fasting for forty days and nights he was tempted by the devil.

The desert wilderness is that place, literally and figuratively, where what is essential (food, clothing, shelter) is made abundantly clear. Everything about life is reduced to its most basic needs: How will I live? What will I eat? For that very reason the wilderness is also a place of mirage and temptation, where we fumble about for phantom replacements for the essential. One's imagination runs wild in the wilderness, and there is no lack of forgeries posing as the real thing.

From a spiritual perspective, the wilderness is that place we enter to be reminded of the One who is truly essential in our lives, where we stand before God with no false veneer, makeup, cologne, designer labels, or

pretense. It is that place where we confront the challenges of daily life not as insurmountable problems but as steppingstones to growth. It is that place where temptation seems to hover ominously over our heads in mirages of fakes and forgeries — but where mirages collapse in the light of God's strength. It is that place where we confront ourselves with no other support than God.

So it was that Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness. Harassed and tempted by Satan's scams, he proved faithful to his Father and to his mission for our sakes. He showed how to prepare for the perils of the desert wilderness, for he unrelentingly clung to his Father, and to him alone. His Father was all the food, clothing, shelter, compass, and companion he needed.

And so it is for us during the forty days of voluntary wilderness living during Lent. Our penance and fasting take us to the desert, where, stripped of customary comforts and excess, we learn to rely on God alone. It is Jesus who shows how to be patient and obedient when the perils lurking in our personal wilderness seem overwhelming. It is Jesus who is the bridge, not made of sand but of love, that takes us safely to freedom.

From *A Lenten Pilgrimage* by Archbishop J. Peter Sartain
(Our Sunday Visitor, 2015)

Church Guidelines for Fasting and Abstinence

The law of abstinence obliges those 14 years of age and older not to eat meat on Fridays throughout the season of Lent as well as on Ash Wednesday. The law of fast obliges all those from ages 18 through 59 to refrain from eating between meals and to limit their eating to one full meal and two lighter meals on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Why Do We Give Alms?

Charitable giving is a very ancient practice; almsgiving was normative long before the time of Jesus. The Lenten call to almsgiving means making the needs of other people our own. One of the central lessons of the cross is compassion; the heavy burdens we carry help us to appreciate the suffering in others. Sharing our material goods is often just the beginning of real Christian giving. We are also called to share our time tending to people in need.

Outside-the-Box Ideas for Giving

- Volunteer at a neonatal center, giving premature babies a human touch
- Tutor a child or mentor a college graduate
- Increase your donation to your local parish

Lent is a time to prepare for Easter; it is a necessary prelude. The sacrificial practices of Lent prepare and purify us in body, mind, and spirit for the passion of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Try this:

A Prayer for Generosity

Lord, I want to be a more generous person.

I am sorry for the times I have held your gifts in a clenched fist.

I am sorry for the times I was blinded by what I wanted and failed to be grateful for the abundant blessings you had already poured into my lap.

Please show me how to be a more grateful and generous person.

Help me to see how my gifts can make a difference in my parish and my community.

Let me use my financial blessings in a way that is sacred and holy.

Give me the strength to turn away from the temptation of too many material possessions.

May I share the gifts you entrusted to me in exactly the way you had hoped I would.

And may I know the deep joy that comes from holy and sacrificial giving.

Amen.

From *Sacred Giving in a World of Plenty*
(pamphlet, Our Sunday Visitor, P1816)

Stations of the Cross

Telling the story of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus was an important part of the early Christian's experience. In the late fourth century, people began making pilgrimages to the Holy Land, where they would follow the path that Jesus took to Calvary. During the Middle Ages, when

outbreaks of war made it impossible for people to travel to the Holy Land, people created a *Via Dolorosa* (“Sorrowful Way”) in their towns and villages. They erected paintings or sculptures depicting the passion of Christ along a processional route or inside a church. By the mid-eighteenth century, the number of stations was fixed at fourteen and the devotion known as the Stations of the Cross, also called the Way of the Cross, became widespread.

From *Your Guide to a Catholic Lent*, OSV.com

10 tips for making the season more meaningful

- 1. Slow down:** Set aside ten minutes a day for silent prayer or meditation. It will revitalize your body and your spirit.
- 2. Read a good book:** You could choose the life of a saint, a spiritual how-to, an inspirational book, or one of the pope’s new books.
- 3. Be kind:** Go out of your way to do something nice for someone else every day.
- 4. Get involved:** Attend a Lenten lecture or spiritual program.
- 5. Volunteer at your parish:** Whether it’s the parish fish fry, cleaning the church, or helping with the food drive, it will give you a chance to help others.
- 6. Reach out:** Invite an inactive Catholic to come with you to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday.
- 7. Pray:** Pray especially for people you don’t like and for people who don’t like you.
- 8. Tune out:** Turn off the television and spend quality time talking with family members or friends.
- 9. Clean out closets:** Donate gently used items to the St. Vincent de Paul Society.
- 10. Donate:** Google “Catholic Missions.” Then pick one mission and decide how you can help by sending money, clothing, or supplies.

From *Your Guide to a Catholic Lent*, OSV.com

Bless Me, Father, for I Have Sinned ...

If you haven't gone to confession in a while, Lent is the perfect time to reconcile yourself with God and the Church. Most parishes have communal penance services with prayers and Scripture readings, followed by the opportunity for individual confession (a necessity for absolution of mortal sins). Or you can also make a private appointment with a priest.

Preparation for confession should include an examination of conscience, which means you think back on sins you have committed since your last confession.

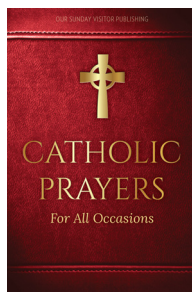
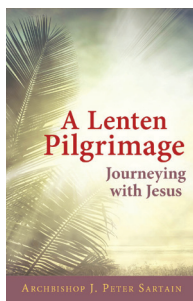
What happens during confession depends on the priest and the person. Most people still start with the formula: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been (state the number of months or years) since my last confession."

If you can't remember the words or don't recall how long it's been, don't worry. Just tell the priest it's been a long time, and he will guide you through the process.

What you will experience is the healing gift of God's love, the chance to start over with a clean conscience, and an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

From *Your Guide to a Catholic Lent*, OSV.com

Resources for Making Lent Matter



Our Sunday Visitor

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