

How to Observe Lent as a Catholic



“JESUS, FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT,
RETURNED FROM THE JORDAN,
AND WAS LED BY THE SPIRIT FOR
FORTY DAYS IN THE WILDERNESS...”

LUKE 4:1-2

Introduction

Before he began his public ministry, Jesus spent forty days in the desert. He prayed, fasted, confronted temptation, and prepared for the journey that was to come. During Lent, we imitate Jesus in self-denial. We pray, fast, and give alms. Using God's Word and centuries of spiritual practices and devotions, we can, little by little, set aside what distracts and harms us, open our lives to deep conversion to the Lord, and emerge ready to enter into the lasting joy of life with the Risen Christ.



Lent began as a period of fasting and preparation for catechumens, or people who were preparing to be baptized at Easter. The fast, originally two days, then for the length of Holy Week, had expanded to a 40-day fast by the fourth century.

As infant baptism became the rule in Christianity, the preparation season for Easter remained. Christians had always prayed and fasted for the catechumens, and as baptismal practices changed, those days became a time of prayer, penance, and conversion of heart for all Christians.

Ash Wednesday

Lent begins with ashes — a traditional sign of mourning, grieving, and repentance for both Jews and Christians (Is. 58:5; Mt. 11:21).

Through the early centuries of Christian history, those who committed serious sins had to do public penance, sometimes for years. Penitents were organized into an "Order of Penitents"; the process was ritualized and culminated on Holy Thursday, when the penitents were readmitted to the Eucharist.

One of the signs of a penitent was ashes or dirt on the person's head,

often at the beginning of their penance. By the early Middle Ages, the practice became a more general Lenten tradition for all Christians, focused on the beginning of Lent. It became a way for Christians to publicly mark their sorrow for sin and to symbolically ready themselves to cast that sin away and open themselves to God during the weeks to come.

Today, as we receive ashes on our heads, usually traced in a Sign of the Cross, we're reminded of who we are: creatures in need of God's love and forgiveness.

The readings for Ash Wednesday offer us good guidance, not only for this day, but for the journey we are taking throughout the next few weeks.

- Joel calls us to return to the Lord through our prayer and fasting.
- Paul appeals to us not to "receive the grace of the Lord in vain" (2 Cor. 5:20-6:2).
- Jesus reminds us to pray, fast, and give alms with an eye to please only God, not impress other people (Mt. 6:1-6; 16-18).

Fasting and Abstaining

During Lent, Catholics are required to fast and abstain on certain days, in imitation of Jesus' fast in the desert. Church law defines "fasting" as eating one regular-sized meal and two small meals. "Abstaining" is refraining from eating animal flesh. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of both fasting and abstinence, and all Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence from meat.

Of course, Church laws are designed to guide a broad range of people in various states of life. We are always welcome to go beyond the minimum by perhaps engaging in a more vigorous fast, abstaining from another food if you are a vegetarian, or fasting an extra day during the week. Wednesday, for example, has been another traditional fasting day for Christians throughout history.



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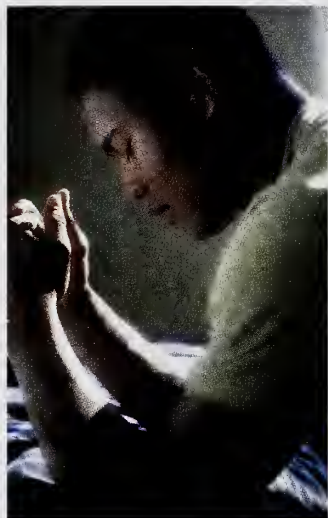
The Crosiers

Traditionally, the observances of Lent have been structured around three practices:

- Fasting
 - Praying
 - Almsgiving

Christians throughout history have found these to be the building blocks of Lenten spiritual growth. They work in two ways: they help cleanse our lives of what distracts us from God, and that new space gives God's grace more room to take root and flourish.

Our Lenten hope and prayer is that in imitating Jesus' sacrifice, we become more like him in every way.



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Fasting: "Proclaim a fast!"

Fasting is an ancient spiritual practice. It is not unique to Christianity. All major religions recognize the value of fasting. This is important for us to remember before we ask, "What does God care if I eat a hamburger on Friday?" Obviously, the wisdom of the ages has found spiritual power in fasting.

During Lent, we fast and abstain from meat on certain days. But we also fast by the common practice of "giving something up for Lent."

When we give up something — something important, something that functions as either a crutch or a pleasure in our lives — we make a sacrifice. This sacrifice helps us in many ways:

- It is penitential, a way to express sorrow for our sins.
- It teaches us that we don't need those things to be happy. We can do without them and depend, as Jesus teaches us, on God alone for our happiness.
- It is a building-block in learning spiritual self-discipline, preparing us for greater sacrifices we will be called on to make further down the road, in imitation of Jesus.
- It is a way of expressing solidarity, individually and as a whole Church, with the poor of this world, the poor in whom Jesus says we will meet him.

What to give up?

"Sacrifice" is the key word here. Jesus showed us that sacrifice is at the core of authentic love. Some areas that many Catholics focus on in their Lenten sacrifice:

- A type of food
- Television or internet time
- Unnecessary spending or shopping
- Alcohol or caffeine

Prayer

In prayer, we turn to God, listen to his voice, and let him fill our hearts and guide us. During Lent, our prayer takes on a special tone: we are especially aware of our sins. We are attentive to Jesus, the suffering servant. We join in prayer for candidates and catechumens, and we pray for our own deeper conversion to the Lord.



The Crosiers

Many find it helpful to go beyond Sunday Mass and use Lent as a chance to broaden and deepen their spiritual lives:

- Celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
- Attend Mass during the week.
- Read and pray with the Mass readings for each day.
- Pray the Liturgy of the Hours.
- Participate in a Bible study or other parish offering.
- Use one of the many Catholic daily devotionals available.
- Pray the Stations of the Cross, either individually or in your parish.
- Pray the rosary.
- Spend time in Eucharistic Adoration.
- Do some extra spiritual reading.

Almsgiving

Being mindful of the poor is not an option for Christians. In fact, Jesus tells us that when we feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, and clothe the naked, we are encountering him.

So, along with fasting and praying, almsgiving has been a traditional Lenten practice. Jesus poured his life out for others. As his disciples, we are called to do the same in our everyday lives, as well as in the extra steps we take outside our ordinary lives and routines. Keeping the Corporal Works of Mercy in mind is helpful as we consider our Lenten almsgiving:

- Feed the hungry (help out at a soup kitchen, donate food).
- Give drink to the thirsty (show hospitality to those in need).
- Welcome the stranger (be welcoming to those you meet).
- Clothe the naked (donate clothing to a shelter).
- Visit the sick (visit the homebound, hospitalized, those in a nursing home).
- Visit the prisoner (join a prison ministry team or offer support to them).
- Bury the dead (visit a cemetery, pray for the dead).



Design Pics

Deciding how to incorporate almsgiving into our Lenten practice doesn't so much involve getting out our planners and seeing what fits our schedule. It is more about what Lent as a whole is all about: finding a quiet space and listening to the Lord's call, committed to following him wherever he leads and wherever we might encounter him on that day in the guise of the poor or needy.

The Catechumenate

Lent began as a preparation period for those being initiated into the Church at the Easter Vigil, and so it continues today. Candidates (those baptized in another Christian communion) and catechumens (those who are unbaptized) celebrate several rites during Lent (which is called, in this context, the “Period of Purification and Enlightenment”):

- The Rite of Election, which takes place in the diocesan Cathedral with the bishop, usually on the first Sunday of Lent. All the catechumens and candidates gather to declare their intentions to join the Church and sign the Book of the Elect.



- The Scrutinies, in which the unbaptized, now called the Elect, are called to examine their lives in the light of the Gospel. These are celebrated on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent.

- The Creed and The Lord's Prayer, which are presented to the Elect and the candidates during this time, often on the fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent.

All of these rites are celebrated during liturgies. We are privileged to pray with and for those coming into the fullness of faith in Christ, and these are rich Lenten experiences for all of us, as we are inspired to deeper faith ourselves.

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Taking Up Our Cross and Following Christ

We need Lent. In the midst of our busy lives, with worldly forces and temptations working hard to distract us from the call of Christ, the weeks of Lent are a gift. As we fast, pray, and extend our hands to the poor, we are imitating Christ, joining ourselves more closely to him. He suffered and sacrificed; so do we. He lives in eternal joy; so will we, as we follow him in hope.

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For further information:

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