

How to get more out of Lent

What is Lent?

Lent, from the Middle English word *Lenten*, meaning springtime - the time of lengthening days, is a period of forty days of fasting, prayer, and penitence before Easter. There is biblical support for doing penance, but the season of Lent, like all Catholic liturgical seasons, developed over time. The observance of Lent is related to the celebration of Easter. In the first three centuries of the Christian era, most Christians prepared for Easter by fasting and praying for three days. In some places this was extended to the entire week before Easter (now known as "Holy Week"). There is evidence that in Rome, the preparation period was three weeks.

In its early three-week form, Lent was the period of intense spiritual and liturgical preparation for catechumens before they were baptized at Easter. Many members of the community imitated this period of preparation with the catechumens.

By the fourth century (when Christianity was legalized) Lent had developed into its current length of forty days, the length of the fast and temptation of Jesus in the desert (cf. Luke 4:1-13). Recently, research has suggested that the development of Lent was also influenced by the forty-day period of fasting practiced by many in the early Church (especially monks). This fast, beginning right after Epiphany (January 6th) stressed prayer and penance. Once most people were Christian and baptized as infants, Lent lost the connection to the preparation of catechumens and the themes of repentance and fasting became dominant.

What is the purpose of Lent?

The key to understanding the meaning of Lent is simple: Baptism. Preparation for Baptism and for renewing baptismal commitment lies at the heart of the season. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has reemphasized the baptismal character of Lent, especially through the restoration of the Catechumenate and its Lenten rituals. Our challenge today is to renew our understanding of this important season of the Church year and to see how we can integrate our personal practices into this renewed perspective.

Why is Baptism so important in our Lenten understanding? Lent as a 40-day season developed in the fourth century from three merging sources. The first was the ancient paschal fast that began as a two-day observance before Easter but was gradually lengthened to 40 days. The second was the catechumenate as a process of preparation for Baptism, including an intense period of preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation to be celebrated at Easter. The third was the Order of Penitents, which was modeled on the catechumenate and sought a second conversion for those who had fallen back into serious sin after Baptism. As the catechumens (candidates for Baptism) entered their final period of preparation for Baptism, the penitents and the rest of the community accompanied them on their journey and prepared to renew their baptismal vows at Easter.

Lent, then, is radically baptismal. In this Update we'll consider some of the familiar customs of Lent and show how we can renew some of our Lenten customs to bring forth the baptismal theme. Every season of the Church year has a certain theme or themes. During Lent, we see four themes in these readings:

1. The need for proper repentance
2. Israel of the Old Testament as the model of the New Testament Church
3. Israel's exodus from Egypt to the Holy Land as the model of the Christian journey out of sin into the Kingdom of Heaven
4. Jesus Christ as the eternal high priest

Why Ashes?

Ash Wednesday liturgies are some of the best attended in the entire year. Some people suggest that is just because the Church is giving out something free, but I suspect there are deeper reasons! Ashes are an ancient symbol of repentance (sackcloth and ashes). They also remind us of our mortality ("remember that you are dust") and thus of the day when we will stand before God and be judged. This can be linked easily to the death and resurrection motif of Baptism. To prepare well for the day we die, we must die now to sin and rise to new life in Christ. Being marked with ashes at the beginning of Lent indicates our recognition of the need for deeper conversion of our lives during this season of renewal.

Why should I give things up?

For most older Catholics, the first thought that Lent brings to mind is giving something up. In my childhood, the standard was to give up candy, a discipline that found suitable reward in the baskets of sugary treats we received on Easter. Some of us even added to the Easter surplus by saving candy all through Lent, stockpiling what we would have eaten had we not promised to give it up.

Some years ago a friend of mine told me that he had urged his children to move beyond giving up candy to giving up some habit of sin that marked their lives. About halfway through Lent he asked the children how they were doing with their Lenten promise. One of his young sons had promised to give up fighting with his brothers and sisters during Lent. When his father asked him how it was going, the boy replied, "I'm doing pretty good, Dad—but boy, I can't wait until Easter!"

That response indicates that this boy had only partly understood the purpose of Lenten "giving up." Lent is about conversion, turning our lives more completely over to Christ and his way of life. That always involves giving up sin in some form. The goal is not just to abstain from sin for the duration of Lent but to root sin out of our lives forever. Conversion means leaving behind an old way of living and acting in order to embrace new life in Christ. For catechumens, Lent is a period intended to bring their initial conversion to completion.

Why should we do anything more?

The Rule of Saint Benedict on Keeping Lent The life of a monk ought always to be a Lenten observance. However, since such virtue is that of few, we advise that during these days of Lent he guard his life with all purity and at the same time wash away during these holy days all the shortcomings of other times. This will then be worthily done, if we restrain ourselves from all vices. Let us devote ourselves to tearful prayers, to reading and compunction of heart, and to abstinence. During these days, therefore, let us add something to the usual amount of our service, special prayers, abstinence from food and drink, that each one offer to God "with the joy of the Holy Ghost" (1 Thes 1:6), of his own accord, something above his prescribed measure; namely, let him withdraw from his body somewhat of food, drink, sleep, speech, merriment, and with the gladness of spiritual desire await holy Easter.

What are the three pillars of Lent?

The three traditional pillars of Lenten observance are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. The key to renewed appropriation of these practices is to see their link to baptismal renewal.

Prayer: More time given to prayer during Lent should draw us closer to the Lord. We might pray especially for the grace to live out our baptismal promises more fully. We might pray for the elect who

will be baptized at Easter and support their conversion journey by our prayer. We might pray for all those who will celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with us during Lent that they will be truly renewed in their baptismal commitment.

Fasting: Fasting is one of the most ancient practices linked to Lent. In fact, the paschal fast predates Lent as we know it. The early Church fasted intensely for two days before the celebration of the Easter Vigil. This fast was later extended and became a 40-day period of fasting leading up to Easter. Vatican II called us to renew the observance of the ancient paschal fast: "...let the paschal fast be kept sacred. Let it be celebrated everywhere on Good Friday and, where possible, prolonged throughout Holy Saturday, so that the joys of the Sunday of the Resurrection may be attained with uplifted and clear mind" (Liturgy, # 110).

Fasting is more than a means of developing self-control. It is often an aid to prayer, as the pangs of hunger remind us of our hunger for God. The first reading on the Friday after Ash Wednesday points out another important dimension of fasting. The prophet Isaiah insists that fasting without changing our behavior is not pleasing to God. "This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own" (Is 58:6-7).

Fasting should be linked to our concern for those who are forced to fast by their poverty, those who suffer from the injustices of our economic and political structures, those who are in need for any reason. Thus fasting, too, is linked to living out our baptismal promises. By our Baptism, we are charged with the responsibility of showing Christ's love to the world, especially to those in need. Fasting can help us realize the suffering that so many people in our world experience every day, and it should lead us to greater efforts to alleviate that suffering.

Fasting: Is for all Catholics, ages 21 thru 59. But let's not dumb down discipleship: if you can do it, do it- no matter your age! Fasting usually means eating only one full meal each day of Lent (excepting Sunday); meat may be taken, and then eating two small meals that together do not equal the main meal, and eating nothing in between meals. Sound rigorous? Think of starving children who have no option. Think of Our Lord Jesus and all His Sufferings for us. Think of the saints. Think of the concentration camps and abortion clinics: do penance for all sinners and liberate by your loving actions. And, by the way, gain self-mastery and lose weight! Try eating less during the day. Abstaining means not eating meat on Friday's of Lent. Remember, this is counter-cultural: we live in a culture of affluence-food abundance, super supermarkets and fifty foot salad bars. Proverbially stare in the refrigerator and wonder what to eat for minutes as you stand in your so-called suffering and "hunger pains". So much yet so picky you get finicky and forget your blessings. The poor do not have this choice-they are begging for scraps from our table. So, yes, it's good to give up ice cream, cigarettes, liquor and chocolate for Lent; this is helpful-part of self denial, yes. But these are not the core of self denial-a greater sacrifice is what is essential-food or water itself, things essential to our body. Deserts and liquor are not essential-Jesus didn't fast from these in the Desert. If you can't fast from food (because of dietary limitations) then deny yourself some other item natural to living (sleep, love, beauty, comforts) and undergo this for God. The point of all this is not heroic self denial for its own sake (this could be another form of self-ism, as the saints knew). We should rather do all this for the glory and love of God, and for our neighbor. Remember-good fruits are the result of penance. Because a certain ascetical practice helps us, it should help benefit and balance our relationship to God and neighbor (asceticism comes from the Latin-Greek root, askein, and "training"). Look: the life of holiness, the virtues and Lenten practices are not self-building but self-denying--for the sake of Our Savior and serving our neighbor....St Paul sums up the spiritual life: "I have been crucified with Christ. I live no longer I, but Christ within me" (Gal 1:20).

Abstaining from meat traditionally also linked us to the poor, who could seldom can afford meat for their meals. It can do the same today if we remember the purpose of abstinence and embrace it

as a spiritual link to those whose diets are sparse and simple. That should be the goal we set for ourselves—a sparse and simple meal. Avoiding meat while eating lobster misses the whole point!

Almsgiving: It should be obvious at this point that almsgiving, the third traditional pillar, is linked to our baptismal commitment in the same way. It is a sign of our care for those in need and an expression of our gratitude for all that God has given to us. Works of charity and the promotion of justice are integral elements of the Christian way of life we began when we were baptized. Almsgiving is the practice of giving to the poor. This may mean you are giving money or you are giving your time. Almsgiving provides the opportunity to separate yourself from a disordered or over extended desire for material things or power.

What else is there to do?

Activities for singles, couples and families

1. Take fasting seriously.

If you want to experience life differently, eat less. Americans are so used to having abundance that it can be truly jarring to cut back on your intake.

"Fasting in itself does not make things right," says Untener. "It helps us see what things need to be made right." Small children shouldn't fast to the same extent as adults or older children, but everyone can give up a favorite food, snack, TV program, or game. Sharing your experience with your family can not only model the importance of this practice, but also help you shore up one another's resolve and experience the pleasure of going through Lent together.

2. Be creative in what you give up.

I have taken to giving up listening to the radio when I'm in the car. I find the silence quite unnerving at first, but come to appreciate it over the 40 days. I find God often has much to say to me during those quiet rides, and I get a better sense of my own spiritual state. Often I become aware that I've been "running on empty," spiritually speaking, and I had been using the noise to mask a yearning for more connection with God.

3. Give to the poor.

There are two ways to teach your kids about charity: instruction and example. Lent is a time to employ both methods. "The word alms means 'a kind gift for someone in need,'" says Untener. Involve your children in almsgiving by sponsoring a needy child through an agency like the Christian Foundation for Children and Aging (800-875-6564), which is a charitable act the children can understand and participate in. Or you can clear out closets and give good used items to Goodwill or your St. Vincent De Paul group. Set aside a chunk of the family budget this month for charity. Have a short family meeting to decide who best to give the money to—a local charity, a needy family, or some other need you're aware of. If you're not aware of any needs, call your parish for suggestions. Vow to become more aware in the coming year.

4. Make the Triduum the high point.

If you wanted to capsule the lessons of Jesus' life, they would be contained in the services for Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. Even the smallest child can learn powerful lessons from the rituals surrounding these holy days: washing feet on Holy Thursday, stripping the altar bare after the Holy Thursday liturgy, the reading of the Passion and venerating the cross on Good Friday, a candle lit in the midst of a darkened church, blessing the oils, and

pouring living water on new members to our community of faith on Holy Saturday.

It might be too much to expect younger children to attend services on all three days (which Triduum means), but choose one or more services to attend. They are revealing truths about our lives our kids will hear no place else.

And don't forget to include your own ethnic and family rituals during Lent and Easter. These are not frivolous activities--they give our kids a sense of belonging and a sense of the sacred, two qualities in short supply in our kids' world.

5. Go to Confession

Because of the focus on penance and reparation, it is traditional to make sure we go to Confession at least once during this Season to fulfill the precept of the Church that we go to Confession *at least* once a year, and receive the Eucharist at least once a year during Eastertide.

A beautiful old custom associated with Lenten Confession is to, before going to see the priest, bow before each member of your household and to any you've sinned against, and say, "In the Name of Christ, forgive me if I've offended you." One responds with "God will forgive you."

Done with an extensive examination of conscience and a sincere heart, this practice can be quite healing. Also note that confessing sins to a priest is a Sacrament which remits mortal and venial sins; confessing sins to those you've offended is a sacramental which, like all sacramentals one piously takes advantage of, remits venial sins. Both are quite good for the soul.

The Value of Frequent Confession

Although frequent confession, has fallen out of fashion, except, perhaps, among the scrupulous, there are many reasons why we should make it a habit.

To begin, our self-knowledge is increased and with that weapon, we can begin to correct bad habits. Our conscience is strengthened. We begin to gain healthy self-control and more closely align our wills to God's.

To parents: Please encourage your child to seek confession regularly. Calm his or her fears by letting him know that it's not Father who is in the Confessional, but Our Lord Himself. Children often worry that "Father will tell." Assure them that Father is bound to secrecy. No one will ever know but God. And once our sins are confessed, God forgets them, too.

Parents of Teens: Every parent of a teen knows the lure of sinfulness that seems to permeate popular culture today. Sadly modern religious education no longer emphasizes the nature and consequences of mortal sin, so that many pernicious activities are not even thought of as sin.

6. Read through the Book of Genesis with your child or by yourself. This book of the Bible has some of the great stories of the Bible that all of us should know.
7. Read through the Gospels in preparation for the death and resurrection of Jesus.
8. Get a book on the lives of the Saints and for children get the children's lives of that saints. Their stories can help all of us in our journey of faith.
9. Do other forms of Spiritual reading during Lent instead of watching TV. At the end of the handouts is a list of some of my favorite books.
10. Attend Mass during the week in addition to every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation.
11. Have family dinners where each person in the family can share the events of their days.

12. Read through the readings for the Sunday Masses before you attend, so you are ready to hear the Word of God proclaimed.
13. Prepare for Mass before you leave home or get to Church before Mass begins so your mind is on the Mass and not on the hassles of the day.
14. Stay after Mass has ended and pray before the Blessed Sacrament. There is no prize for being the first out of the parking lot.
15. Spend some quiet time with the Lord in Church or at home in a quiet place.
16. Make a prayer corner or room in your home where members of the family can go to pray and be quiet.
17. Go to the hospital or a nursing home and visit with the patients or residents.
18. Understand what is happening at the Masses during Lent, especially the special Masses in which the elect are undergoing their scrutinies.

What are the Scrutinies?

To best define scrutinies, I have used direct quotes below from the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) document. The scrutinies are mainly for the "elect" (catechumens become "elect" after the Rite of Election at the beginning of Lent). But the faithful are encouraged to join in the scrutinies to also benefit from them. We are all in need of conversion throughout our lives, so we join with the "elect" in scrutinizing our lives and pray for the grace to overcome the power of sin that infects our hearts.

"141 The scrutinies, which are solemnly celebrated on Sundays and are reinforced by an exorcism, are rites of self-searching and repentance and have above all a spiritual purpose. The scrutinies are meant to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong, and good. For the scrutinies are celebrated in order to deliver the elect from the power of sin and Satan, to protect them against temptation, and to give them strength in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. These rites, therefore, should complete the conversion of the elect and deepen their resolve to hold fast to Christ and to carry out their decision to love God above all."

"143 In order to inspire in the elect a desire for purification and redemption by Christ, three scrutinies are celebrated. By this means, first of all, the elect are instructed gradually about the mystery of sin, from which the whole world and every person longs to be delivered and thus saved from its present and future consequences. Second, their spirit is filled with Christ the Redeemer, who is the living water (gospel of the Samaritan woman in the first scrutiny), the light of the world (gospel of the man born blind in the second scrutiny), the resurrection and the life (gospel of Lazarus in the third scrutiny). From the first to the final scrutiny the elect should progress in their perception of sin and their desire for salvation."

The elect deal with sin through the Scrutinies and through the waters of the font; the already baptized deal with sin through the Sacrament of Penance. The same kind of reflection that enables all members of the community to share in the Scrutinies can lead the baptized to celebrate this Sacrament of Reconciliation to renew their baptismal commitment.

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The Scrutinies are generally celebrated on the 3rd, 4th & 5th Sundays of Lent.

19. Stations of the Cross

20. Corporal or External Fast

Including the abstinence from certain foods, drinks and amusements, i.e. music, and parties during Lent. These points of fast should be stressed today especially with the mania of entertainment besetting our society;

Corporal or External Practices

Take less of what you like and more of what you dislike at meals today

Take nothing to drink between meals.

Do not use seasoning on your food today.

Do not use any sweeteners with your food or drinks today.

Avoid listening to the radio at all today.

Take nothing to eat between meals today.

Avoid any T.V. or videos; instead read the Passion of Christ in your Bible or missal

Take only one helping of each item at meals today.

Say an extra Rosary.

21. Spiritual or Internal Fast

Consists of abstinence from "all evil"--sin. Saint John Chrysostom taught that the "value of fasting consists not so much in abstinence from food but rather in withdrawal from sinful practices." And Saint Basil the Great explains: "Turning away from all wickedness means keeping our tongue in check, restraining our anger, suppressing evil desires, and avoiding all gossip, lying, and swearing. To abstain from these things---herein lies the true value of fast";

Spiritual or Internal Fast Practices

Don't do any unnecessary talking; instead, say little throughout the day.

Exercise your patience today in all things.

Don't make any complaints today.

Restrain any anger, and go out of your way to be kind to the person who caused your anger.

Don't be distracted with someone else's business.

Avoid any gossip today, instead say an extra Rosary to overcome this fault.

When asked to do something extra do so with a joyful and pleasant attitude today.

Speak in a pleasant tone to everyone today.

Avoid using the phone.

Tell the truth in all your dealings today.

Avoid vanity or self-seeking today.

Spiritual Change

The practice of virtues and good works must be the main objective of our fasting. The Fathers of the Church insisted that during Lent the faithful attend the Lenten church services and daily Mass.

In the course of the centuries, our fasting discipline has undergone numerous and radical changes.

Today, unfortunately, the observance of the Lent is but a mere formalism, reduced to abstinence on certain days and without any stress in ones spiritual growth or the amending of one's lifestyle.

It is urgent that we return to the pristine spirit of the Great Fast which is so badly needed in our materialistic world.

Spiritual Practices (virtues and good works)

Practice humility today in all your actions.

Be generous today; help someone in need.

Look for ways to be helpful throughout the day.

Do a job that needs being done without being asked.

Be courageous; walk away from any impure situations today.

Don't be at all idle today. Always be doing something for others or for your own spiritual growth.

Go out of your way today to help or talk to someone who is usually difficult.

Volunteer for an extra job today.

Say an extra Rosary today for the conversion of a sinner.

Visit someone who is sick or lonesome today. Offer to say the Rosary with them.

Five Mistakes Moderns Make About Lent

Father John J. Lombardi

1. Fasting and all that self-denial stuff is Unnecessary: Self-denial is one of the most important aspects of our Religion-and one of the most neglected, rejected, by the modern world. Why is this seen as passé? Because we live in a culture of comfort: if it feels good do it; if it doesn't feel good, avoid it. Remember our Lord's counsel (not optional): "If any one wants to be My follower, he must deny himself, pick up his cross daily and come after Me" (Lk. 9:23). Remember: when you deny yourself you affirm God.
2. I can do it myself: No, we need grace--God's help--to empower us, other wise we become perfectionist type-a camouflaged spiritual egoists; different than becoming perfect-(cf. Mt. 5: 48).and our Lenten practices become one big show off (cf. Mt. 6:2ff). This mythic mistake is one of modern man's typical ones: the more you selfishly you grunt and squint on your own without God, the thinking goes, the more you will accomplish. Just as we conquered the West we can conquer ourselves. Not so in the spiritual life. Here's how St Paul says it: "May the God of peace Himself make you perfectly holy, and may you, entirely, spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless for the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ"-II Th 5:23.) You need God, and remember, as St Paul exhorts: "I can do all things thru Christ Who strengthens me". Ask for His supernatural Grace to overcome your bad habits, your addictions and inordinate affections-ask for His actual graces in a specific situation to avoid sin and choose Him. Remember the Mass: Thru Him, with Him In Him.
3. God loves me just the way I am...After all, I'm not a murderer. Yes, God loves you just the way you are, and He loves you so much to leave you that way ("Thank God" we should all say!).If you let Him He will show you are not a saint and that you can be perfected, what you need to work on, weed out and also what to embrace (see "examine"-a kind of "spiritual floss," below).St Paul reports: "Therefore, lest I get too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me...I begged the Lord that it might leave me...but He said to me: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (II Cor. 12:7-10) Remember: Holiness is lifelong.
4. Penance is Passé: Jesus calls us to do Penance-"Unless you do penance, you shall all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3); and St John the Baptist cries: "Do penance, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Mt.3:2). Our Holy Mother Church calls this Season before Easter a "penitential season." One of the main messages of Our Lady of Lourdes (apparitions to St Bernadette in 1858), was: "Penance, penance, penance." This means: we must try to make up for our sins. With every sin there is a punishment as part of justice (break a window, fix it; sin, do penance); and not everyone has fulfilled this (incl possibly ourselves!). So: it is a heroic act of mercy; love and wisdom to help the world to help atone for its sins. For Acts of Penance see below. Remember: "Produce good fruit which is evidence of repentance" (Mt. 3:8).
5. Lent must be gloomy-and therefore I'm not going to "do it". No: When we fast, pray and give alms, give up beer and bubble gum, soap operas or vicious driving, we should rejoice that: 1)we are converting to God; 2)doing charitable works for others; 3)living more sanely and gaining in self mastery. While doing penances you may not feel happy and light; but you may be joy-full, which means, accessing a "deeper spiritual river" of contentment in the Holy Spirit, a Grace of God that you are in accord with his Divine Will. Thus: everyone should "do Lent"! Remember-Lent is about a relationship, the most important one-with God and our neighbor.

Holy Angels Parish Lenten Activities

Parish Penance Service March 18 at 7pm

Eucharistic Miracles Exhibit

Saturday, March 6th- Holy Angels School Gym- 5 to 8 PM.

Sunday, March 7th – Holy Angels School Gym- 8 Am to 2 PM

Saturday, March 13- Holy Angels School Cafeteria- 5 to 8PM

Sunday- Holy Angels School Cafeteria- 8AM to 2 PM.

For further information, see www.therealpresence.org:80/eucharst/mir/engl_mir.htm

Parish Lenten Retreat Saturday, March 13th with Fr. Ryan Ruiz

Confessions every Saturday from 3-5pm, and on Thursday before 1st Friday from 4-5pm and 8:30-9pm

Stations of the Cross Tuesdays at 2:30pm

Adult Education 3rd Monday of the Month at 7pm

Bible Study see bulletin

Daily Mass see bulletin

Eucharistic Adoration—Thursday before 1st Friday from 4-9pm and on 1st Friday following the 8:45am

Mass until the 6:30pm Mass

Operation Rice Bowl

Good Spiritual Reading for Lent

Genesis

Any of the Gospels

Job

The Lives of the Saints

The Screwtape Letters by CS Lewis

The Great Divorce by CS Lewis

The Chronicles of Narnia by CS Lewis

As I Lay Dying by Fr. Richard Neuhaus

When the Well Runs Dry by Fr. Thomas Green

The Shadow of His Wings by Fr. Gereon Karl Goldmann

The Imitation of Christ - Thomas a Kempis

Contemplative Prayer by Thomas Merton

A Day in Your Presence: A 40-Day Journey in the Company of St. Francis