

SUGGESTIONS FOR LENT

Lent is about discovering true joy instead of settling for the passing pleasures we often experience. We should prefer union with God to the myriad temptations which all try to convince us of the same lie: “there is something better than God somewhere else.” God loves us infinitely and unconditionally! Lent helps us purify our hearts to recognize that our relationship with Jesus is our true treasure—what could be better than a love that never fails? The confidence with which we make our “yes” to be disciples of Jesus gives us the strength to say “no” to temptations which lead us away from Him.

We live in a society where every day is a party—we can have whatever we want whenever we want it. Fast food, convenience stores, and online shopping have made instant gratification our constant way of life. We need to return to a rhythm of life with fasts and feasts. Only then do celebrations become real and bring true joy. Lent is a time of preparation which leads to the celebration of Easter. How well we prepare directly impacts the richness of our celebration. Perhaps the most radical thing we could do this Lent would be to restore the rhythm of each week. Saint John Vianney started freeing his parish from the secularization of the French Revolution by convincing people to keep Sunday holy. It should be a day free from shopping, household chores, and homework and instead devoted to prayer, family, recreation, and service of others.

The three pillars of Lent are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. All three are ways of growing in holiness. Every Lenten practice should manifest itself as another step towards our becoming saints. If it doesn't contribute to an increase of love for God and neighbor, then it really isn't relevant to Lent.

PRAYER

Principle: Prayer orients everything in my life towards getting closer to God. My life's journey should lead to heaven—how seriously am I seeking it? Prayer isn't simply a spiritual chore on my task list!

Try these practices:

- Daily Mass—nothing better than welcoming Jesus Himself in Holy Communion!
- Eucharistic adoration—linger, spend time with Jesus to deepen your friendship with Him.
- Daily Rosary—Our Lady promised Mother Teresa of Calcutta that “all will be well” for those who daily pray the rosary together as a family. Mary is the first and best disciple so let her teach you how to follow Jesus. Praying just one decade should be possible even with little children!
- Confession (monthly)—do a good examination of conscience and humbly seek His Mercy so that you are always ready to meet the Lord!
- Spiritual reading—get away from cruise control and welcome new ideas to help shake off complacency in the spiritual life.
- Add Grace after Meals to your daily prayer routine: “We give Thee thanks, Almighty God, for all Thy benefits who livest and reignest world without end. Amen. May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.”
- Participate in parish activities such as the Stations of the Cross, etc.

FASTING

Principle: I need to develop self-restraint instead of self-indulgence. By being faithful in little things I train myself in order to become faithful in big ones. Fasting strengthens the will to command the unruly passions. I can acquire discipline instead of giving in to the mentality of “if it feels good, do it.”

Try these practices:

- No snacks between meals!
- Give up desserts except on feast days.
- Limit or eliminate forms of “screen time” (television, video games, and general computer usage).
- Pull back from social media, texting, and even lengthy phone conversations—which waste time, even if not otherwise sinful.
- Don’t throw parties or festive social gatherings except on feast days—remember the penitential season!
- Turn off the radio (or iPod, etc.) except for certain times of day—escape the “dictatorship of noise” which forms a continual background to life and instead pursue silence which fosters a prayerful and contemplative life.

ALMSGIVING

Principle: Along with self-restraint, another brake on self-indulgence is self-gift. In fact, love means the ability to make a gift of self to another! To know if you’re being loving in a particular situation, simply ask “am I giving or taking?” We need generosity of heart in order to be truly Christ-like. We also need to be free from attachments to worldly things so we can be attached to God!

Try these practices:

- Distinguish between tithe and alms—both relate to money but a tithe is a sacrifice to the Church in justice to pay a debt of gratitude to God whereas alms are free gifts to a neighbor in charity. A tithe is giving 10% of our income back to God as thanksgiving for the 100% of everything which He has given to us. Fulfilling our tithe to the Church (recommended 8% to parish and 2% other Catholic entities) is necessary before we can even begin to give alms to other charitable organizations or to a particular neighbor in need. Neither is about seeking a tax deduction or being persuaded to support a worthy cause. Both are about recognizing that we are only stewards of what has been entrusted to us and must give an account of our use to God.
- Pray that the Holy Spirit shows you the way to be “poor in spirit” as Jesus preached in the Beatitudes. Can I recognize what my needs are vs. what my wants are? Honestly, our needs are few and simple but our wants have never been larger in this incredibly affluent society!
- Work to overcome selfishness—whenever we buy something new (or receive it as a gift), then give something I already have away! (e.g. a new sweater received means an old sweater will be given to the poor)
- Remember the value of the “widow’s mite”—Jesus said it was worth more than all the other gifts to the Temple because it came not from her surplus or excess goods but was a sacrifice. It isn’t a sacrifice if it doesn’t hurt. Do I give out of my “extra” or does it make me deny myself?
- “Store up treasure in Heaven”—make “lifestyle choices” here which give witness to the world that I am not trying to create paradise on earth but am longing to find my true home in Heaven. Only in this way can I escape the materialism which weakens my resolve to seek God above all else.
- Think about “you did it to Me” (Mt. 25)—Mother Teresa identified this parable of the sheep and the goats as the summary of the entire Gospel. Do we share our possessions with others as if it was Jesus Himself who was in need? Jesus also identified “Mammon” (another word for money or wealth) as the chief rival to God for man’s affection.

BOTTOM LINE

Any budget is a theological document—show anyone how you spend your time, energy, and money and he/she will be able to tell what’s important to you. Use prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to line up the concrete decisions of daily life with the priorities we should have as Christians. Lent is about becoming saints—not about holding our breath until Easter and then resuming life as we were before!