

The Season of Lent

What Catholics Believe and Practice

What is Lent?

Lent is the 40-day period of preparation for Easter. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends with the beginning of the Mass of the Lord's Supper in the evening on Holy Thursday. The counting of the 40 days doesn't include the Sundays of Lent—even during Lent each Sunday is a "little Easter" filled with joy and the "feast" of the Eucharist. The word "Lent" comes from the same root as the word "lengthen." It's an old word for springtime, when the each day lengthens.

Why 40 days? The number 40 calls to mind many stories from our Bible: the 40 days and nights of rain after Noah entered the ark; the 40 years the Hebrews wandered in the desert; the 40 days of fasting for both Moses and Elijah as they encountered the Lord on Mt. Sinai. We especially remember the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness fasting and praying after His Baptism. We join Jesus in the desert as we face the struggles of life as His disciple. The days of Lent are often compared to a journey—at the end of Lent we hope to find ourselves somewhere different from where we started. We hope to spend this time worthily preparing to renew our Baptismal promises at Easter—purified, cleansed and strengthened for our ultimate journey to heaven.



Baptism Takes Center Stage

Every Lent we prepare to renew the covenant promises of our Baptism. We recognize the struggle involved in living out this covenant in daily life—do we really reject evil and the attractions it presents, do we really reject the lies of the devil and choose sacrificial love rather than self-love? Do we truly believe in God and in His Church? Do we live the freedom won for us by Christ's death and do we freely spend our lives for God and others?

In St. Paul's letter to the Romans, we are instructed that when we were baptized, we were baptized into the death of Christ so that we could live a new life in Him—dead to sin, alive to Jesus Christ. As we renew our covenant promises, we also pledge to support one another in the Body of Christ—especially those who are seeking to join us as new Catholics at the Easter Vigil.

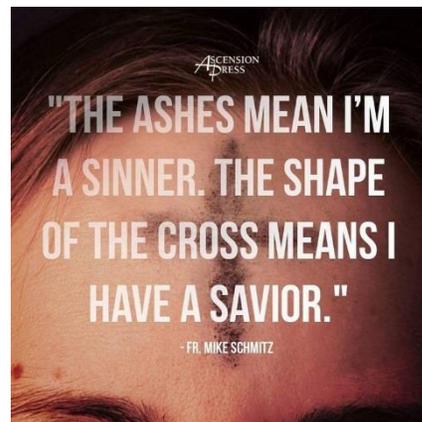
***“This is our Faith. This is the faith of the Church.
We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** Rite of Baptism

What is Ash Wednesday?

Smearing ashes on our foreheads in the form of a cross is an odd thing to do! It makes us stick out. It makes us dirty. It mars our appearance. Ashes represent death. In the past, people put ashes on their faces when someone near to them died. It was a way to remind those around them to treat them with understanding. For a while at least they would be overwhelmed with death.

Ash Wednesday is a kind of slap in the face to bring us to our senses. “Remember, human, you are dust and to dust you will return.” That’s what God said to Adam and Eve when they were banished from paradise. We hear those words spoken to us on Ash Wednesday.

However, the words “you are dust” don’t reveal the whole truth about human beings. The cross on our foreheads tells us that there is more to be said. We are beloved dust, redeemed dust—and the cross promises us a brighter future as sons and daughters of God, saved by the cross of Jesus Christ.



The Spiritual Disciplines of Lent

At baptism, Christians take on three lifelong disciplines. These are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Prayer is communication with God. Fasting is self-denial, self-control, simple living. Almsgiving is giving to those in need. We share our goods, our money, our talent and our time. These three disciplines help us remain faithful to our baptismal promises. Each of these disciplines can take many forms.

The spiritual disciplines function best when they are done together. They balance each other. The word “discipline” reminds us that we are disciples. A disciple is one who follows after and learns from a Master. During Lent, we take these spiritual disciplines as our special focus—they become “exercises” for us. Exercise does little good unless it’s done according to a schedule that we stick to. If we make excuses not to exercise, if we cheat on the program, then we won’t get results. Exercises can become routine and we can get sloppy, lazy and imprecise. Lent is our time to “tune up” and be more aware and careful about how we go about these disciplines.



Lent is the season to sharpen our discipleship in Christ. Perhaps we are growing stale or lukewarm and need to find new ways to practice these disciplines. Perhaps we need to recommit, to find a training partner to keep us on track. Perhaps we are being called to deepen and intensify these disciplines—ready for a higher degree of holiness.

As disciples of Jesus Christ who live in a culture and age of comparative great wealth, we are very much in need of the discipline of fasting. Lenten fasting (on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, for those aged 18-59) means to eat just one full meal a day (with 2 small snacks if necessary). Abstinence (on Fridays of Lent for those older than 14) means not eating certain meat of beast or fowl (fish is allowed). A traditional Lenten diet is mostly grains, legumes and vegetables. But Lenten fasting can extend to our use of time—less frivolous entertainment, less nonsense, less “junk food” for the soul. We try to do things consciously, deliberately. The Book of Tobit says, “Prayer with fasting is good. But better than both is almsgiving with justice. Giving a little to the poor with justice is better than giving a lot with injustice.”

An intensified focus on prayer gives us an opportunity to strengthen or revitalize our relationship with God. That way, our disciplines of fasting and almsgiving are rooted in the love we experience from God and the love we wish to give to God and to His beloved children. Prayer during Lent can mean more time and more variety in our prayer. While we can grow in skills and the practice of prayer, the primary way forward is to cultivate a humble, quiet and seeking heart—for God is the one who initiates, guides and receives our prayer.

Other Traditional Lenten Practices

The **Stations of the Cross** taken on special importance during the season of Lent. Many parishes gather to pray this beautiful devotion every Friday of Lent. The Stations of the Cross lead us through a series of 14 “stations” or stopping points along the way of the cross—from Jesus’ condemnation to

What Will You Give Up for Lent?

Children are often encouraged to give up something for Lent, such as candy or other treats. As adults, we are sometimes told that “giving up” something for Lent isn’t useful or necessary.

However, giving up little treats or luxuries is still a good way to practice self-discipline and keep our focus on God. We grow indulgent and self-absorbed so easily—and rather than do the hard work of facing vices or trials we succumb to the temptation to ‘reward’ ourselves. Our problems remain, but we have done nothing to teach ourselves how to follow Christ. Fasting can change this vicious cycle of trial, self-absorption, ‘reward,’ then disappointment.

Catholics fast from things we enjoy not because we want to make ourselves miserable or because we hate the good things God gives—but because we love God more. We want to remind ourselves to focus on God, the Giver, rather than on the gift.

Fasting gives us the opportunity to say, “I know that it is God that I truly seek and hunger for; God alone is big enough to fulfill my desires and give me peace.”

The discomfort of fasting is also a little cross we can offer to the Lord—for the good of our souls and for the good of the others.

By fasting, we also experience (in a small way) the life situation of many of our brothers and sisters around the world—who do not have the luxury of choosing to do without these things.

death through his being laid in the tomb. Prayer booklets lead us through scriptural and meditative reflections so that we both honor Jesus' sacrifice for the sake of the world and so that we find ways to join Jesus by taking up our own cross and following after Him. There are many versions of the stations of the cross—and it is absolutely appropriate to pray them privately even in your home if you cannot make it to a church.



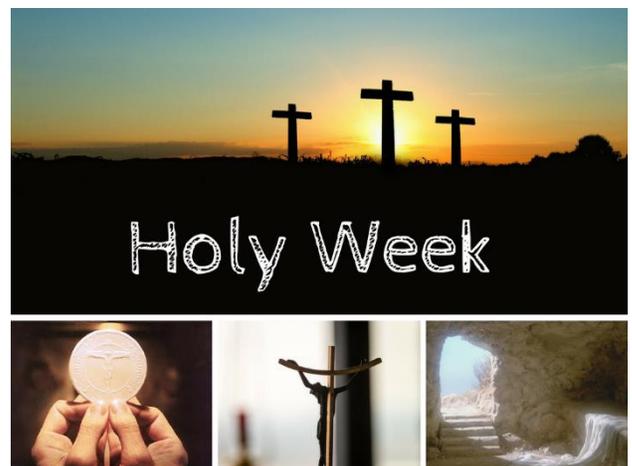
Celebrating the **Sacrament of Penance**

(going to Confession) is a wonderful Lenten practice. As we prepare for the Easter sacraments, we want to 'clean house' and make sure we are in a state of grace. In fact, one of the Precepts (laws) of the Church is to confess any serious sins before receiving the Eucharist at Easter. If we are in a state of mortal sin (having committed a serious sin with full knowledge and full consent), then we are to not receive Holy Communion until we have gone to confession. Even when we are

not aware of any mortal sin, going to confession restores our soul to its state of Baptismal purity. The confession of venial (not-deadly) sins can strengthen our virtues and bring us spiritual health—every sin, even those that are not deadly, is still wrong-doing and harms our relationship with God. If you haven't been to confession for a long time, just let the priest know before you begin. He will walk you through the Sacrament and help you make a good confession.

Palm Sunday and the Sacred Triduum

The sixth Sunday of Lent is called "Palm Sunday." It is the day we commemorate Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem and the beginning of the Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection. We process with palm branches and singing into the church and, during the Liturgy of the Word, we hear the story of Jesus' passion proclaimed from one of the Gospels. As Holy Week continues, we prepare for the highpoint of our entire Liturgical year, when we journey with Jesus through the events of His Last Supper (Holy Thursday), Crucifixion and Death (Good Friday), burial (Holy Saturday), and Resurrection from the dead (Easter Sunday). These special liturgies of the Church make up the "Sacred Triduum" (or three days) of the year—they celebrate the events that make us Christian.



What Should I Do Lent?

Making Plans for a Productive Lenten Season

Lent is a 40-day period.

What behavior, attitude or weakness is **worth 40 days** of my concentrated effort?—"worth it" because of the high 'pay off' if I get this thing vanquished, or because I am likely to succeed, or because it's a real hindrance in my walk with Jesus...

Lent invites us to improve (even perfect) our fasting, praying, and almsgiving.

How am I about disciplining myself through **acts of self-denial or sacrifice**—what can I fast from in order to help 'tame the tiger' of my desires/wants?

How am I about **keeping close to Jesus** throughout each day and listening to Him in my prayer—how do I feel called to deepen my relationship with Jesus this Lent?

How selfish am I with **my time, my talents, my treasure**—what can I give away to begin to release a tyrant's hold on my heart?

What are you doing for Lent?
10 IDEAS FOR A MORE MEANINGFUL LENTEN SEASON

- 1. Give up sin**
Show your love for God by keeping his commandments. Turn away from sins.
- 2. Fast**
An empty stomach can lead to more attentive prayer. Give the money you saved on food to others in alms.
- 3. Pray**
Be in constant prayer. Pray for your family and friends, for those who suffer, and for the Church and the world.
- 4. Do good works**
Help those in need. Pray for them and be ready to serve them in their time of need.
- 5. Give alms**
Help the poor and support the good works of the Church. Give cheerfully to God who has given us everything we have.
- 6. Abstain**
Give up meat or other desirable foods during Lent, especially on Friday, the day of Christ's saving death on the cross.
- 7. Do meditative reading**
Nourish your faith by spending time in quiet reading and reflection. Prayerful reading of God's word each day will open your heart to the Spirit, and let God's thoughts and ways influence yours.
- 8. Control desire for possessions**
Build up treasures in heaven rather than on earth. Cut down on material possessions, eliminate frills, lessen wants, share yourself – your time and your talents – with others.
- 9. Control desire for entertainment**
Too much entertainment and other distractions can lead to less or no time for the works of the Lord.
- 10. Carry out duties in life**
Serve God by living out your vocation in love each day. God is calling each of us to be a living sacrifice. Offer your daily life through Christ!

Text from Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops "Living Lent"
Archdiocese of Toronto
www.archtoronto.org
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Lent challenges us to abstain from luxuries such as meat on Fridays.

In addition to following the Church's laws (if I am obliged), what other "little luxury" can I refuse this Lent (or just on Fridays of Lent) in order to grow more detached from material things and more attached to heavenly things?

Lent focuses on the Passion of Jesus through devotions such as Stations of the Cross and the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary.

When Jesus died on the cross, it was as if all our sins were nailed there with him. What is one sinful, persistent vice that I need to see nailed to His cross?

Jesus loved me, and each person I encounter, with a powerful, personal, passionate love while he died upon the cross. Who is one person who might need to experience Jesus' love through my words or actions to them?

Lent is a period of preparation to renew our Baptismal Promises at Easter.

My Baptism established a covenant of love between me and God, between me and Christ's Body, the Church—God promises to see me as His beloved child, I promise to love Him as my Beloved Father. What can I work on during this Lenten season so that my renewal of Baptismal promises rings true, rings triumphant? When can I commit to going to Confession to restore my soul to its Baptismal purity?

Lent is a period that prepares us to rejoice in Jesus' resurrection at Easter.

After Lent and after Good Friday, comes Easter Sunday! What is one thing, after these 40 days of self-denial, sacrifice, and hard work, that I long for God to bring to life in me? What will new life in Christ require of me?