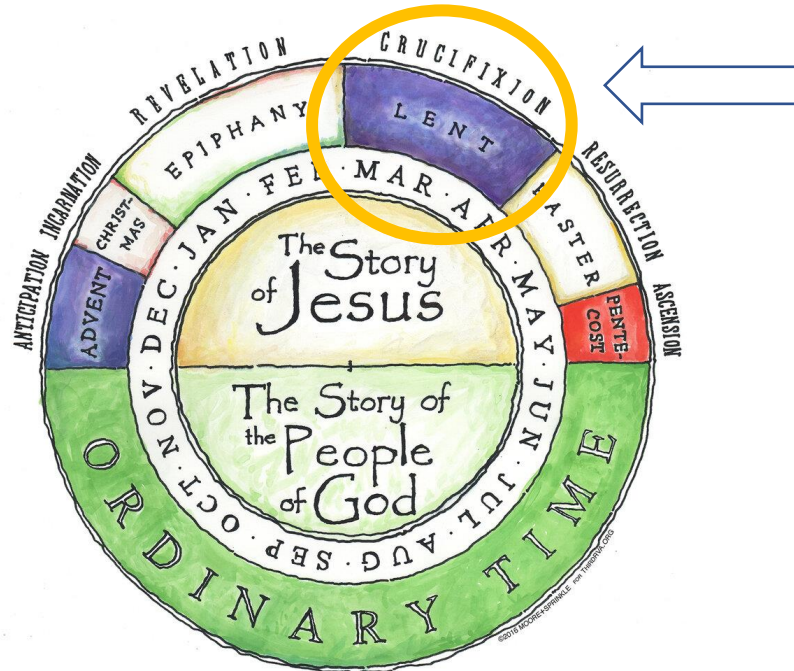


Journey through Lent

For Catholics, **Ash Wednesday** is the beginning of the liturgical season of Lent. We receive ashes on our foreheads as the words “Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return” are spoken. This humble act recalls the creation of Adam from the dust of the ground. And it symbolizes our need for ongoing repentance throughout our lives. Our journey through Lent begins with this focus on our need for God’s mercy.



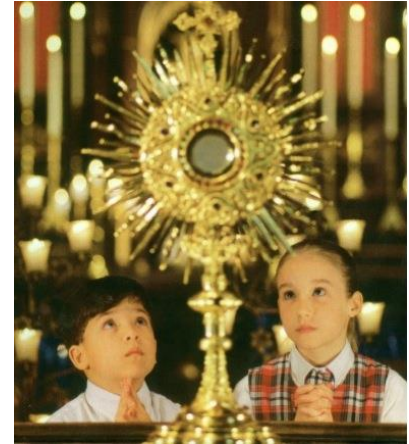
Lent is a forty-day time period that leads up to the Church’s memorial of Christ’s Passion and Death during **Holy Week** and the celebration of His Resurrection from the dead on **Easter Sunday**. This time period reflects the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness before the beginning of His public ministry. There, Jesus fasted, prayed, and endured temptation to strengthen Himself for the work of salvation He was about to undertake. Likewise, during Lent, we are asked to prepare ourselves to receive the gift of salvation from sin by repenting from our sins, doing good works, and renewing our commitment to our Faith in Christ. Lent is also the time in which people who have been preparing to receive the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion in order to enter full communion with the Catholic Church begin their final preparations. They will be welcomed into the Body of Christ and receive their Sacraments at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday.

There are a number of ways that the Church offers us to enter more deeply into Lent. In the Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday, Jesus teaches His disciples about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. These three practices are the pillars of our Lenten journey.



Almsgiving is giving food or money (alms) to the poor. More broadly speaking, almsgiving means to care for the needs of others, especially those who are in the most need, such as the poor, the sick, the suffering, and the outcast. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches His disciples the Corporal Works of Mercy (feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, visit the sick, and bury the dead). He also taught that whenever we perform these good works, we are not just loving our neighbor, but we are loving Christ himself. The Works of Mercy should be a guide for our own actions to care for the needs of others, not only (and especially) during Lent, but throughout the year.

Prayer is to be in relationship with God. Prayer is talking with God, asking good things of Him for ourselves and for others, being in His presence, and listening to Him talk to us. There are many different ways to pray: formal prayers such as the Our Father or the Hail Mary; in our own words; reflecting on the words of Scripture or the writings of the saints; in and through the liturgies of the Church; in contemplation of the beauty of creation and the works of God; or in silence. Whatever the method of prayer, Lent is a time for us to focus on our relationship with God in an intentional way so that we can grow closer to Him.



Fasting is to intentionally give something up or deny ourselves something as a sacrificial offering. Fasting helps to strengthen our will so that we are better able to say no to temptations and avoid sin. Traditionally, many Catholics will give up something during the entire season of Lent such as candy, soda, or watching TV. Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 (if they are healthy and able) are required to fast from food on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. When fasting, Catholics are permitted to eat one full meal and two small meals that together are not equal to a full meal, and should avoid snacking between meals. Also, Catholics 14 years-old and older are required to not eat meat (**abstain**) on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and every Friday during Lent.

Some other Lenten practices include not saying the word Alleluia during Mass. Alleluia means “praise the Lord” and is typically sung as an acclamation Gospel reading during Mass. We respectfully reserve the use of this word during Lent so that we can use it again during Easter to joyfully acclaim Christ’s Resurrection. The singing of the Gloria during Mass is similarly reserved during Lent for much the same reason.

The liturgical color of Lent is purple, or violet. Purple is a color that represents **penance**. It serves as a reminder of the solemnness of the season and our focus on fasting and repentance from sin. It reminds us of our call to do acts of penance to make up for our sinfulness. The Church strongly encourages the faithful to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Lent, and to extend forgiveness to those who have hurt us.

Focus Questions:

1. What is Ash Wednesday? What do we receive on this day and what is its meaning?

2. What is Lent?

3. How does Lent reflect Jesus' time in the wilderness before the beginning of His public ministry? What does this mean for us?

4. For whom is Lent a special time of preparation?

5. What does it mean to give alms?

6. What is prayer?

7. What is fasting? What are the rules of fasting during Lent?

8. Why don't we sing or say the Alleluia during Lent?

9. What is the liturgical color of Lent? Why?

10. What does the Church strongly encourage the faithful to do during Lent?
