

## **LENT A TIME OF SPIRITUAL RENEWAL**

### **What is Lent?**

Lent is a solemn 40-day period in the Church's liturgical year in which we prepare ourselves spiritually for the great celebration of Easter. The name itself is derived from a Germanic word for springtime and came to be used in English-speaking countries in place of the Latin term *quadragesima* ("forty days"). The tradition of celebrating Lent for forty days is drawn from the experience of Jesus, who spent forty days in the desert fasting and preparing himself for his public ministry. The season of Lent is one of the two penitential seasons in the church's liturgical calendar. It begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes on the afternoon of Holy Thursday. Lent is meant to be a time of spiritual renewal in which we take stock of our relationship with God and neighbor, undertake penance for the sins we have committed, and seek to make positive changes in our daily lives.

### **What are some of the traditions associated with Lent?**

Perhaps one of the best-known traditions is the custom of receiving ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. In the biblical world, people wore ashes on their heads as a sign of mourning and repentance. This custom continues today as a sign that we are sorrowful for our sins and wish to make a new start in our spiritual lives. Another popular Lenten devotion is the Stations of the Cross, in which we meditate on the various events in the passion and death of Jesus. In addition to these devotions, the Church requires persons over the age of 14 and under the age of 59 to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and to abstain from eating meat on the Fridays of the Lenten season. Some people choose to fast and abstain on other days as well. Many Catholics follow the custom of "giving up something for Lent" – forsaking some enjoyable pleasure (sweets, snacks, alcohol, a favorite TV program, social media activity) as a way of doing penance. The idea behind this practice is that if we are able to give up something we are legitimately allowed to enjoy, we will be more disciplined when it comes to giving up sinful patterns of behavior in our lives. Indeed, giving up bad habits like gossiping or complaining is ultimately a more commendable practice than giving up chocolate or potato chips.

### **What can I *do* for Lent?**

Many Catholics tend to concentrate on the negative dimension of Lent – giving something up, abstaining from meat, fasting, etc. To be sure, these penitential practices are extremely valuable as a means of self-discipline. Nevertheless, a genuine Lenten spirituality should also focus on the positive: doing something extra for God and other people. Lent offers us wonderful opportunities to grow in our relationship with God, by giving extra time to prayer or Scripture reading. Some ideas for spiritual growth during Lent might include attending daily Mass, praying the rosary, making the Stations of the Cross, spending quiet time in prayer before Jesus in Eucharistic adoration, taking part in a Bible study, or going to confession. Taking part in the sacrament of Reconciliation is an especially valuable practice during this season of penance and self-reflection. In an effort to make this sacrament more available, confessions will be heard every Wednesday evening during Lent in addition to the normal confession times in our parish.

The season of Lent also summons us to be more loving and caring toward our family, friends, and the broader community. Perhaps the time we sacrifice by giving up a TV program could be spent deepening our relationships with our spouse, children, or other close family members. Or maybe we could donate the money we would otherwise have spent on a favorite food or drink to a local charity. Almsgiving is an important component of Lent, whether in the form of monetary donations to charitable causes or giving of our time at a soup kitchen, food pantry, or homeless shelter.

### **Preparing for Easter**

As we enter into the Lenten season, embracing a more disciplined lifestyle and seeking God's help in rooting out our sinful behaviors, it is important that we keep the end goal in mind. Lent is not a means unto itself, but rather a time to prepare ourselves for the celebration of Jesus Christ's triumph over death in his glorious resurrection. Easter Sunday – not Ash Wednesday or even Good Friday – is the high point of the Church's liturgical year, because the resurrection of Jesus is what gives us hope for our own resurrection on the last day. We adopt a more penitential way of life during Lent as a reminder that our present existence, where joy intermingles with struggle and sorrow, is but a pale foreshadowing of the glory that awaits us when we share in Christ's risen life in the new creation that he will bring about when he returns in glory. St. Augustine captured this notion beautifully in an ancient homily contrasting Lent and Easter: "Because there are these two periods of time – the one that now is, beset with the trials and troubles of this life, and the other yet to come, a life of everlasting serenity and joy – we are given two liturgical seasons, one before Easter and the other after. The season before Easter signifies the troubles in which we live here and now, while the time after Easter which we are celebrating at present signifies the happiness that will be ours in the future. What we commemorate before Easter is what we experience in this life; what we celebrate after Easter points to something we do not yet possess. This is why we keep the first season with fasting and prayer....Both these periods are represented and demonstrated for us in Christ our head. The Lord's passion depicts for us our present life of trial – shows how we must suffer and be afflicted and finally die. The Lord's resurrection and glorification show us the life that will be given to us in the future."

### **Lenten Resources**

Creighton University has an excellent series of reflections and resources for celebrating the Lenten season, including options for an "at home" Lenten retreat. They can be accessed online at

<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/Lent/>

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