

# Lent: The Basics

## What is Lent?

Lent is the annual preparation for Easter calling us to reform our lives and to open our hearts to the spiritual blessings God has promised to bestow on us. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday.



## What must I do?

Catholics in good health aged 18 to 59 are required to fast and abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and to abstain from meat on all other Fridays of Lent. Youth 13 and older are to abstain from meat on those days. Fasting means that no more than one main meal is eaten daily, while in the same day no more than two partial meals are eaten which together do not equal one main meal.

## What should I do?

During Lent we should practice the three main disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These practices offer us all opportunities to grow in faith and in love for God.

## Why prayer, fasting and alms?

Lent calls us back to the basics of our faith. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are key personal responsibilities of our faith, the minimum expected of us to show our appreciation for God's gift of divine life, which we want to grow in us. From Scripture, there's

never a question that Christ's followers are to pray, fast and give alms—only how and in what spirit they are to do them.

## Why does Lent seem so negative, so focused on sin?

Starting with the somber symbol of ashes, Lent indeed has its negative side, in part because Lenten discipline aims to make us aware of the reality of our own sinfulness and weakness. We won't seek a doctor if we don't know we're sick. But the purpose of Lenten discipline isn't negative. Self-denial helps us empty ourselves so that we can be filled with God. It helps us hunger and thirst for the food and drink our souls need. We freely give up good for the promise of something better. But do not undertake Lenten disciplines as if by themselves they might heal us, make us holy or earn God's favor. Rather, their purpose is to open our hearts so that the Holy Spirit can work in us.

## Should I set goals for Lent?

Yes, and reflect prayerfully about your Lenten resolutions before making them. Then make a list, but be modest. You may be setting yourself up for disappointment if you set unrealistic goals. Doing a little with love and devotion is spiritually more beneficial than trying to do much but doing it halfheartedly. ■

## Forgiveness: The Heart of the Gospel

In his book, *Forgiveness: One Step at a Time*, Fr. Joseph Sica reminds us that when we forgive “we completely release ourselves from all hurts. Forgiveness enables us to overcome anger, bitterness and hatred, together with a desire to punish or get even with someone who injured us.”

Focusing on forgiveness is a good way to start Lent. The gist of Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:23-24 is *Don’t begin prayer or any religious act without first seeking forgiveness from and reconciliation with anyone who has anything against you.*

How could it be otherwise? Forgiveness is the heart of the gospel. God sends his Son, who, in becoming an innocent victim

of capital punishment, reconciles a fallen world and secures pardon and forgiveness for all. Jesus on the cross forgives his executioners—even suggesting a reason to forgive: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Forgiveness isn’t easy, but unless we are willing to work toward a forgiving heart, how can we count ourselves among Jesus’ followers?

After *The Lord’s Prayer* at Mass, we exchange the sign of peace with our brothers and sisters. By this sign we acknowledge that we must be at peace and forgiving with others, and that we recognize God as the loving Father of us all. ■

### ✠ Mass Scripture Readings For Ash Wednesday, Lenten Sundays and Triduum ✠

Ash Wednesday Joel 2:12-18 • Psalm 51:3-6,12-14,17

2 Corinthians 5:20—6:2 • Matthew 6:1-6,16-18

First Sunday of Lent Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7 • Psalm 51:3-6,12-14,17

Romans 5:12-19 • Matthew 4:1-11

Second Sunday of Lent Genesis 12:1-4 • Psalm 33:4-5,18-20,22

2 Timothy 1:8-10 • Matthew 17:1-9

Third Sunday of Lent Exodus 17:3-7 • Psalm 95:1-2,6-9

Romans 1-2,5-8 • John 4:5-42

Fourth Sunday of Lent 1 Samuel 16:1,6-7,10-13 • Psalm 23:1-6

Ephesians 5:8-14 • John 9:1-41

Fifth Sunday of Lent Ezekiel 37:12-14 • Psalm 130:1-8 • Romans 8:8-11

John 11:1-45

Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion Matthew 21:1-11 • Isaiah 50:4-7 • Psalm 22:8-9,17-20,23-24 • Philippians 2:6-11 • Matthew 26:14—27:66

Holy Thursday Exodus 12:18,11-14 • Psalm 116:12-13,15-18

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • John 13:1-15

Good Friday Isaiah 52:13—53:12 • Psalm 31:2,6,12-13,15-17,25

Hebrews 4:14-16;5:7-9 • John 18:1—19:42

Holy Saturday (Vigil) Genesis 1-2:2 • Romans 6:3-11 • Psalm 104:1-2,5-6,10-14,24,35 • Matthew 28:1-10

**CRUCIFIED JESUS**, during this holy season of Lent, help us to stand prayerfully and reverently under the shadow of the cross and contemplate the awesome price of our redemption. Keep us ever faithful to you, and give us the desire daily to seek and to do the will of your Father. Amen. ✠

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