



Repent and Believe

Getting Started with Lent

The Journey Begins

Use this resource alone or with others. Used with others, read the reflections aloud, pausing between paragraphs. Invite each member of the group to take a turn reading, or prepare readers in advance for larger groups. Share with each other your Lenten commitments and promises, keeping within the silence of your own heart those things which belong only there.

Opening Ritual and Prayer

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others after a hectic day.

Leader: Let us remember we are in the presence of God.

All: We welcome you, God, and ask that you be with us today.

Leader: Gracious and compassionate God, open our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to you throughout this Lenten season.

All: God, let us all be open to you.

Leader: Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.

All: Amen.

An Invitation from God

Lent begins with an invitation from God: “Come back to me with all your heart” (see Joel 2:12). Our Lenten journey is our response to God’s invitation.

The Word “Lent”

Interestingly, the word “lent” comes from Old English through Middle English to modern English. Looking at its origin, “lent” is a shortening of the word “lengthen,” used to describe the increasing amount of daylight each day. It was used to describe the harbinger of spring and new life, of sap running in trees, buds opening, green grass, daffodils, tulips popping up, etc.

Spring for many is a time of cleaning. Lent is a time for spiritual spring cleaning. In order to make more room for God and one another, we clean out the clutter that has accumulated in our lives.

Liturgical Mathematics: Counting Forty Days

Mathematically speaking, there are 46 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. So how did we get 40? It was developed not by means of math but by theology. Every Sunday is Easter, even during the Lenten season, for every Sunday is a memorial of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When we subtract the six Sundays of Lent from the total, we end up with 40.



Lent: A Brief History Lesson

Church historians tell us that by the end of the fourth century, a forty-day period of fasting was observed in parts of the church in commemoration of Christ's forty days in the desert. Later this developed into a penitential season for preparing for Easter. By the end of the fourth century, Lent had two emphases: It was the time of formation and preparation for the catechumens (those seeking entrance into the church) who would be baptized at the Easter vigil on Holy Saturday. In addition, it was a time of reconciliation for those members of the church whose sins had separated them from God and the church.

The shape and understanding of Lent changed with time. The public reconciliation of penitents died out, as did the catechumenate. Lent had shifted from a season of baptismal renewal to a liturgical season of fasting.

The Fathers (Bishops) of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) called for the restoration of the original meaning of Lent. Here is what the bishops had to say about Lent in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*: "The season of Lent is both a time of preparation for baptism and a time of penance for the faithful, in both cases to prepare for Easter. Hence the practice of penance should be fostered in ways that suit our time and the local region" (nos. 109-110).



The Symbolism of Ashes and Ash Wednesday

The origin and custom of using ashes is discovered in parts of the Old Testament. Ashes accompanied prayer in the case of Abraham when he said to God: "Let me take it upon myself to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust

and ashes” (Gen 18:27). The prophet Jeremiah uses ashes when he calls for repentance: “O daughter of my people, gird on sackcloth, roll in ashes” (Jer 6:26). The prophet Daniel pleaded for God to rescue Israel and used sackcloth and ashes as a sign of Israel’s repentance: “I turned to the Lord God, pleading in earnest prayer, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes” (Dan 9:3). Similar actions expressing repentance for sin are found in the book of Judith (see Jdt 4:11, 15; 9:1). In the New Testament, Jesus refers to the use of sackcloth and ashes as signs of repentance (see Mt 11:21; Lk 10:13).

In the early church, when the season of Lent was a time period for reconciliation of public sinners, the penitents would come to church at the start of Lent wearing a penitential garment, suggesting sackcloth, an Old Testament symbol for seeking repentance. They were sprinkled with ashes and ritually dismissed from the assembly to do their penance for forty days, returning to church on Holy Thursday. With time the dismissing of penitents disappeared, but the ashes remained as a reminder and call to penance of all the faithful. The act of imposing ashes symbolizes human mortality and fragility and the need to be redeemed by the mercy of God.



Ash Wednesday after Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council called for the renewal of Lent, so that it might recover its ancient baptismal character. This recovery was significantly advanced by the restoration of the catechumenate mandated by the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (1972). As Catholics have increasingly interacted with catechumens in the final stage of their preparation for baptism, they have begun to understand Lent as a season of baptismal preparation and baptismal renewal.

The ceremonies of Ash Wednesday, at the beginning of Lent, promote this baptismal focus of Lent. A hint of this is one of the formulas for the imposition of ashes: “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.” Though it doesn’t explicitly mention baptism, it recalls the baptismal promises to reject sin and to profess our faith. It is a clear call to conversion, to that movement away from sin and toward Christ that we have to embrace over and over again throughout our lives.

From Ashes to Font

The message of Ash Wednesday is the call to continuous conversion. We move through Lent from ashes to the baptismal font. We dirty our faces on Ash Wednesday and are cleansed in the waters of the font. More profoundly, we

embrace the need to die to sin and selfishness at the beginning of Lent so that we can come to fuller life in the Risen One at Easter.



When we receive ashes on our foreheads, we remember who we are. We remember that we are creatures of the earth (“Remember that you are dust”). We remember that we are mortal beings (“and to dust you will return”). We remember that we are baptized. We remember that we are people on a journey of conversion (“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel”). We remember that we are members of the body of Christ (and the smudge on our foreheads will proclaim that identity to others, too).

Lenten Practices

Catholics are encouraged in Lent to cultivate three religious practices: fasting and abstinence; prayer; almsgiving. The purpose of our Lenten practices is to discipline ourselves to be attuned to the activity of God in our lives.

What does it mean to fast?

Fasting is making do with less food. The result of not eating so much and getting hungry is that we have a heightened sense of awareness. When we eat too much, we have a sluggish feeling. When we fast, we are more alert and open to the activities of God in our lives. Fasting cleanses our bodies and prepares us to pray more deeply.



When do we fast?

Always check your local diocesan regulations regarding Lenten observances. In general, Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 are required to fast. This means that on these days we eat only one full meal, with no food between meals. It is understood that if one eats three meals a day, the two other meals should not total one full meal. Of course, everyone is free to fast at any other time as an aid for prayer and reflection.

Fasting is more than simply developing self control around food. Spiritual fasting, as opposed to dieting, enhances our hunger for God. Fasting is one of the most ancient practices in Lent.

What does it mean to Abstain?

To abstain is to refrain from eating meat, as an act of penance and sacrifice. Since innumerable people in the world cannot afford to eat meat, our abstaining from eating meat can put us in solidarity with the hungry and poor of the world.

When do we abstain?

Always check your local diocesan regulations regarding Lenten observances. In general, Catholics in the United States abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and all the Fridays of Lent. This does not include abstaining from eggs and dairy products. All Catholics who have completed their fourteenth year of age are bound by the law of abstinence.



Prayer

Prayer is described as the raising of the mind and heart to God or conversing with God. Lent is a time to make a conscious effort to pray more and with greater regularity. There are many ways to pray in Lent.

Sunday Eucharist. The celebration of the Eucharist is considered the source and summit of Catholic prayer. Actively preparing for the Sunday Eucharist by reading the assigned Scripture readings ahead of time can be part of one's Lenten discipline. Some Catholics even choose to celebrate Mass more often than just on Sundays of Lent.

Daily Prayer. Lent is a time to pray as an individual, as a family and as a faith community. Set aside time daily for your own personal prayer time. Pray as a family at meals. Bless one another as you leave your home in the morning and before you go to bed at night. One of the simplest and most natural gestures is to trace a cross on a loved one's forehead. It speaks volumes to a young child when a parent gives him or her this sign of love and prayer.

"The things, good Lord, that we pray for, give us the grace to labor for."
St. Thomas More

"Don't be afraid. Trust in Jesus."
St. Clare to her sisters in religious life.

"A day without prayer is like a sky without the sun, a garden without flowers."
Saint John XXIII

Praying with the Bible. Choose a quiet place and allow yourself some quality time to pray a psalm from the Bible each day of Lent. The book of Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible and the church. Lent is a time when you can make it your prayer book.

“Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”
St. Jerome

“Sacred Scripture changes the heart of whoever reads it from earthly desires to embracing spiritual things.”
St. Gregory the Great

For Reflection: What time(s) will I set aside for prayer this Lent?

Make a Retreat. A retreat can be described as a voluntary stopping of workaday actions and a special commitment to prayer, silence, and reflection. A retreat is a temporary withdrawal from normal activities in order to get in touch with God and experience spiritual renewal. Retreats can be as short as a day or longer if chosen. In Lent you could contact a retreat house in your area where you could make your own retreat.



For Reflection: How will I set aside time for a retreat this Lent?

Pilgrimage. During Lent make a pilgrimage to a holy place that is nearby: a place of natural beauty, a cemetery where loved ones are buried, a monastery, a priory, a cathedral, or the church in which you were baptized or married. When you arrive, center yourself and pray in your own way in the holy place.

For Reflection: This Lent I will make a local pilgrimage to....



Spiritual Reading. St. Benedict, the founder of the Benedictines, saw reading as a prayerful activity. He required each of his monks to read a book during Lent. Anyone can practice spiritual reading in Lent. Select books that deal with Sacred Scripture, biographies of saintly people, books on prayer or sacraments, or ones that deal with developing a deeper spiritual life. Reading has the ability to deepen one’s prayer life.

For Reflection: This Lent I will set aside specific time for spiritual reading.

Almsgiving

“Almsgiving is the mother of love, of that love that is characteristic of Christianity.” John Chrysostom, Fourth-Century Bishop

Almsgiving is much more than giving money to the poor or to your favorite charity. It is all the things we can do to make the broken world whole again. The aim of giving alms is to right the wrong distribution caused by greed or power or anything else. The three modes of giving alms are: time, talent, and treasure.



Time. In our fast-paced world, time is the alms that is hardest to give. It might be a parent or a grandparent giving that form of alms to a child generously and regularly, or a person volunteering time at a food shelf or a women’s shelter, or a person taking time to tutor adults in a literacy program, or citizens lobbying legislators for affordable housing for the poor. To give freely and generously of our time is a healthy practice of Lenten almsgiving.

For Reflection: How will I generously give of my time this Lent?

Talent. Everyone has been blessed by God with talents. We can practice the talent alms by cooking a meal for a terminally ill person or an elderly shut-in. We can use the talents of our hands by helping to fix up someone’s home or doing some spring cleaning for them. We can drive people to medical appointments or shop for the elderly and infirm. Lent is a time to both inventory the talents we have and to make use of them.

For Reflection: How will I use my talents during Lent?



Treasure. How do you share your treasures, both the things you own and the money you earn? Could you live for less if it meant it would feed the hungry of your community? What donations could you make to charity this Lent? Are you keeping up with the pledges you have made to your alma mater or to your parish? Could you forgive someone a monetary debt they owe you?

For Reflection: This Lent I will share my treasures and be more generous toward...