



What is the Meaning of Lent?

The 40-day pilgrimage to Easter is meant to be life-changing!

How much do you know about God?

In the book of Wisdom, chapter 6 verse 18 says that the first step towards acquiring wisdom is a sincere desire for instruction; the desire for instruction is love, and love is the keeping of her laws.

When we fail to keep her laws – in other words, when we sin – it's not because we want to be sinners. It's because we understand too little about love and the God who is Love: who he really is, what his divine nature really means for our lives, how much he truly loves us, what he expects from us and why he expects it, how truly loving his laws are and why they are loving, and so forth.

That's why Jesus said on the Cross: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." If we were fully aware of the harm that our sins cause, how good God really is, how passionately he cares about us, and how much he can help us find holy alternatives to sinful behavior, we probably would not sin.

The way to overcome sin is to *be aware*:

- Be aware of what we're doing.
- Be aware of what God is doing.
- Be aware of what God wants.
- Be aware of why he wants it (in other words, how it's based on love).
- Be aware of what's unloving about our behaviors and decisions.
- Be aware of how loving God is.

With this awareness, we can go to God for help in avoiding the sins that tempt us. That's why he has provided the Sacrament of Confession as a ministry of the Church. In this sacrament, God gives us his merciful love and he gives us his supernatural help (the "grace") to overcome the sins that we confess.



Lent is a season of becoming more aware of our need for God to help us overcome sin.

Lent is a season of forty days of reflecting on what Jesus did to heal us from sin as we prepare for Easter and the benefits of living as an Easter people.

What does it mean to be an "Easter people"? We have been resurrected from the destructiveness of our sinfulness. We are alive in the faith as followers of Christ and we will join him in heaven after we die. Lent helps us become more aware of this; it's a season of deepening our Easter character.

Pope Benedict XVI says that Lent is "a privileged time of interior pilgrimage towards him who is the fount of mercy. It is a pilgrimage in which he himself accompanies us through the desert of poverty, sustaining us on our way towards the intense joy of Easter" (Sept. 29, 2005).

What "desert of poverty"? Matthew 5:3 says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We are "poor in spirit" whenever we realize that we are sinners in need of the saving power of Christ.

Ash Wednesday begins the Season of Lent.



Ashes are made by burning the palm branches from last year's Palm Sunday celebration. Ashes represent our mortality, which was caused by the destructiveness of sin. We go to Mass

on Ash Wednesday to have ashes smudged onto our foreheads in the sign of the cross as a reminder that Jesus took this destruction upon himself. Anyone may receive the ashes, including non-Catholic Christians.

The minister (which can be a priest, deacon, or lay person) who gives us the ashes says one of the following to us: "Remember, you are dust, and to dust you will return" or "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." It's a great way to start Lent!

Lent has 40 days

Sundays during Lent are not considered part of the forty days. Sundays always celebrate the Lord's resurrection.

After the forty days of Lent comes the Holy Triduum: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. Then comes Easter.

The forty days of Lent unites us to the forty-day experience of Jesus in the desert at the start of his ministry. There, he resisted the temptations of the devil. By refusing to sin, Jesus conquered the Tempter for us. By uniting ourselves to Jesus more closely during Lent, we grow stronger in resisting temptation.



Therefore, Lent is forty days of examining our lives (more than we normally do) to become aware of the ways we succumb to temptation so that we can ask for and receive forgiveness and to grow stronger in holiness. Lent is a time of purification. To help us with this, we have three special practices: Fasting, Prayer, and Almsgiving.

Fasting and Abstinence:

We fast to improve self-control in an act of solidarity with those who are less fortunate. It also reminds us that everything we have is a blessing from God.

Throughout all of Lent, we make personal sacrifices in a spirit of penance. For example, in sadness for our sins we might dine out less or stop watching TV shows that glorify immoral behavior.

On Fridays, Catholics age 14 and older abstain from meat. Why Fridays? Because it unites us to the day of our Lord's death. Why abstain from meat? Because during biblical times, meat was considered a food of rejoicing, since it was not always available. We abstain from eating meat ("the food of rejoicing") in mourning for Jesus and the death he suffered for our sins.

On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, we abstain from meat – *and* those who are 18 to 60 years of age also fast by limiting food to just one full meal or two small meals (except when health or the ability to work is seriously affected).

Prayer:

Lent is an invitation to grow closer to God. Because prayer improves our relationship with God, we pray more during Lent. Catholic churches offer increased opportunities for prayer, but we should also increase our prayers at home and wherever we go. Popular Lenten devotions include attending Daily Mass, praying the Rosary, and meditating on the Stations of the Cross.

Almsgiving:

Almsgiving is an act of charity. We put our faith into action by sacrificing time, talents, and financial resources. By giving priority to doing good deeds (for example, helping the less fortunate), we make self-denial a personal penance for our sins, and we grow in holiness.