

Your Guide To A Catholic Lent

Everything you need for a more spiritual Lent [Our Sunday Visitor](#)

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W. P. Wittman photo

What is Lent?

Lent is the forty-day liturgical season of fasting, special prayer and almsgiving in preparation for Easter. The name "Lent" is from the Middle English *Lenten* and Anglo-Saxon *Lenten*, meaning spring; its more primitive ecclesiastical name was the "forty days," *tessaracoste* in Greek. The number "forty" is first noted in the Canons of Nicaea (A.D. 325), likely in imitation of Jesus' fast in the desert before His public ministry (with Old Testament precedent in Moses and Elijah). By the fourth century, in most of the West, it referred to six days' fast per week of six weeks (Sundays were excluded); in the seventh century the days from Ash Wednesday through the First Sunday were added to make the number forty.

Fasting and abstinence

Days of Abstinence: No meat can be eaten on Ash Wednesday and all of the Fridays during Lent. This applies to all Catholics 14 and older.

Days of Fast: Only one full meal is permitted on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday for Catholics between 18 and 59. Two smaller meals are permitted, but the small meals should not equal a second full meal. Drinking coffee, tea and water between meals is allowed. Snacks between meals are not allowed.

What are you doing for Lent this year?

Ask Catholics what they're doing for Lent this year, and they'll probably tell you that they are giving up a favorite food, a favorite pastime or anything else they really love but isn't essential in their lives.

Giving up something for Lent fosters self-discipline and tempers our desires. It is a form of fasting. It is a form of penance. It promotes spiritual growth. If you're giving up something for Lent, that's great. But think also about the possibility of doing something positive to bolster your spiritual life and make the world a better place. Look for ways that you can increase your knowledge of your faith, strengthen your spiritual life or perform special acts of mercy and kindness at home, at work, in your parish or in your community.

Lenten prayers and devotions

- Begin each morning with the prayer: "Lord, I offer you this day, and all that I think, and do, and say."
- Attend Daily Mass as often as possible.
- Pray the Sorrowful Mysteries of the [Rosary](#).
- Make the [Stations of the Cross](#) at home or in a parish celebration.
- Read [Scripture](#) for 10 minutes every day.
- Pray the Seven Penitential Psalms (Psalm [6](#), [31](#), [50](#), [101](#), [129](#) and [142](#)).
- Spend some time in quiet prayer before the [Blessed Sacrament](#).
- Abstain from meat for an extra day or two each week.
- Listen to spiritual music or a spiritual speaker.
- Keep a Lenten journal with your spiritual insights, special intentions, people you want to pray for, hurts and disappointments that you want to offer up, and progress reports on your Lenten resolutions.

Stations of the Cross



Telling the story of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus was an important part of the early Christian's experience. In the late fourth century, people began making pilgrimages to the Holy Land, where they would follow the path that Jesus took to Calvary. During the Middle Ages, when

outbreaks of war made it impossible for people to travel to the Holy Land, people created a [Via Dolorosa](#), or "Sorrowful Way," in their towns and villages. They erected paintings or sculptures depicting the Passion of Christ along a processional route or inside a church. By the mid-18th century, the number of stations was fixed at 14 and the devotion known as the Stations of the Cross, also called the Way of the Cross, became widespread.

10 tips for making the season more meaningful

1. Slow Down - Set aside 10 minutes a day for silent prayer or meditation. It will revitalize your body and your spirit.
2. Read a good book - You could choose the life of a saint, a spiritual how-to, an inspirational book or one of the pope's new books.
3. Be kind - Go out of your way to do something nice for someone else every day.
4. Get involved - Attend a Lenten lecture or spiritual program.
5. Volunteer at your parish - Whether it's the parish fish fry, cleaning the church or helping with the food drive, it will give you a chance to help others.
6. Reach out - Invite an inactive Catholic to come with you to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday.
7. Pray - Especially for people you don't like and for people who don't like you.
8. Tune out - Turn off the television and spend quality time talking with family members or friends.
9. Clean out closets - Donate gently used items to the St. Vincent de Paul Society.
10. Donate -- Pick one mission and decide how you can help by sending money, clothing or supplies.

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned...

If you haven't gone to confession in a while, Lent is the perfect time to reconcile yourself with God and the Church. Most parishes have communal penance services with prayers and Scripture readings, followed by the opportunity for individual confession (a necessity for absolution of mortal sins). Or you can also make a private appointment with a priest.

Preparation for confession should include an examination of conscience, which means you think back on sins you have committed since your last confession.

What happens during confession depends on the priest and the person. Most people still start with the formula: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been (state the number of months or years) since my last confession."



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If you can't remember the words or you don't recall how long it's been, don't worry. Just tell the priest it's been a long time, and he will guide you through the process.

What you will experience is the healing gift of God's love, the chance to start over with a clean conscience, and an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

[How to make a good confession](#)

Families can make Lenten memories

Lent offers opportunities to pass on your faith to children. Here are some ideas for making Lenten memories:

- Pray together. Even if it's just an Our Father or Hail Mary, it unites the family.
- Let each family member mention one person or problem that they would like to pray for in a special way at dinnertime.
- Take the kids grocery shopping for the poor. Let them help you bring the food to your parish pantry or the local food bank.
- Let children light a candle at church for people throughout the world who are sick or hungry.
- Sample Lenten food favorites, such as hot cross buns or pretzels. If you're really adventurous, check the Internet for recipes and make your own!
- Check your diocesan newspaper for the location of a Passion play. Take family members and friends.

What almsgiving *really* means

Giving alms has always been an important part of Lent. For many people, it means giving money to Catholic charities or some other good cause. But the concept of almsgiving goes much deeper. It is our response to the teachings of Jesus that encourage us to reach out to people in need—not just with our money—but with our time and our talents. Today we might call it '[stewardship](#)'.

Lent gives us the opportunity to cultivate a spirit of generosity. It gives us a chance to share what we have and who we are with other people. It puts us in communion with others and helps us understand that we are all members of the Body of Christ. Think carefully about how you will share your time, your talents and your treasure during Lent. Keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus who himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).