

Lesson 19: Lent

Please click twice to watch the video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xMgWbg1Xs8>

Lent is a season of simple living. As the entire Church prepares for the great celebration of Christ's Paschal Mystery in the Easter Triduum, Catholics make special efforts to pray, do penance, and do good works. Every day of the forty-day Lenten season is an opportunity to live simply and prepare for Easter.

The Significance of Forty

Forty is a significant number in the Bible! When Noah was in the ark, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. Jesus was presented in the temple 40 days after he was born. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. Jesus prayed in the desert for 40 days and nights – which is where the traditional length and spirit of Lent come from. Finally, after the Resurrection, Jesus was with his disciples for 40 days, before ascending into Heaven. There are many other instances, but these are just a few.

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. This is the day when ashes are distributed. Every Palm Sunday, palms are blessed. The following Ash Wednesday, the leftover palms are burned and used for the distribution of ashes. The priest or other minister, traces a cross with the ashes on to every person's forehead while saying one of two options. Option one is: *Repent, and believe in the Gospel.* Option two is: *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

There is an old saying, "Remember, there is a God, and you are not Him." Ash Wednesday gives us this important reminder so we can start Lent in the right way – acknowledging our mortality, weakness, sinfulness, and our need for a Savior.

The Three Foundations of Lent

Repentance – turning towards God – is what Lent is really all about. The Church presents us with three main areas in which we can grow throughout the 40 days of Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Prayer: Prayer may sound intense but it doesn't have to be. Lent might be a good time to pray the Stations of the Cross or the Rosary, going to Mass more than once a week, or reading a religious book.

Starting with small attainable goals helps maintain the habit. For example, instead of deciding to pray the Rosary every day and then becoming discouraged when you fail, start by praying it on Saturdays and then once that becomes a habit, add days incrementally.

Or, instead of deciding to read a book and never finding time, take the number of total pages in the book and divide them by the 40 days of Lent.

Fasting: Many people take fasting to extremes, but it really does not have to involve anything large scale. Every Friday during Lent is a “no meat” day. But throughout the rest of Lent little sacrifices can be made such as giving up sweets, a treat that we could do without (like a snack between meals or buying gum), or something similar. The money saved can be given to the poor or given to your parish.

Almsgiving:

There are many ways to give alms. Giving a little extra to the parish collection on Sundays, giving money to a charitable organization, or giving money to the poor or the missions can all count as almsgiving.

However, almsgiving does not just include money. Helping around the house, doing a good deed for a neighbor, visiting the home-bound or those in nursing homes, or assisting in some way at your Parish are all ways you can give without necessarily giving money.

So while Lent may seem demanding and perhaps uncomfortable, its purpose is definitely not to cause us pain. During this important season, we are given an opportunity for self-examination in order to better discover both our identity as children of God and the beautiful relationship with the Lord that can flow from that.

Symbols of Lent:

Ashes: Made from palm leaves of the previous year, ashes can remind us both of the baptismal and penitential character of Lent. They not only represent our own mortality and utter dependence on God, but also symbolize our efforts of dying to sin (and rising to new life in Christ).

Violet (deep purple): Violet is the liturgical color of the season and symbolizes its repentant character, as well as Christ as the King of the world. (Deep purple was a color reserved for royalty in Jesus’ time.)

Fish: As a Lenten symbol, fish stands for the obligation to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. We also abstain from meat on other Fridays of the season.

Barren stones: Stones call to mind the desert, and Jesus’ testing by the devil there.

Pretzels: Made from simple dough which has no dairy or fat, pretzels remind us of fasting and, shaped like two arms crossed, of prayer.

