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ALMSGIVING

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (Is 58:6-7).

One of the central lessons of the cross is compassion; the heavy burdens we carry help us to appreciate the suffering in others. When Jesus encourages us to help our neighbor, he means anyone who suffers from poverty, brokenness, loneliness, anxiety, or fear. When we slow down and begin to see with the eyes of Christ, we realize that suffering is all around us in those broken in body or spirit: children, the elderly, family members, parishioners, strangers, and friends.

And, as Scripture reminds us, sharing our material goods is often just the beginning of real Christian giving. We are called to give of ourselves, of our time, to others in need — perhaps an even more challenging form of sacrifice. While this authentic giving is not easy, sharing what we have been given — through the forty days of Lent and beyond — reminds us that everything we have, even our very life itself, comes from God.



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Almsgiving opportunities are all around us:

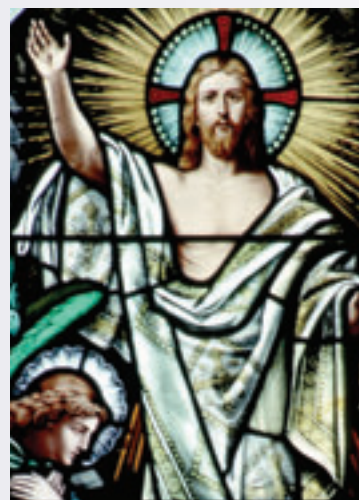
- ✕ collect and donate canned goods to a local food pantry
- ✕ box up and donate extra clothing and coats
- ✕ increase donations to the local parish
- ✕ give funds to a global charity foundation
- ✕ listen more closely to colleagues and family members
- ✕ visit a shut-in or start an ongoing friendship with a resident of a local nursing home
- ✕ volunteer at a neonatal center, giving premature babies a human touch
- ✕ help soldiers returning from war integrate back into daily life
- ✕ tutor a child, or mentor a college graduate
- ✕ offer free babysitting for a single parent
- ✕ send a letter, card, or email to someone who might be lonely or sick
- ✕ donate blood

Being aware of needs around us can encourage us to make almsgiving a habit, a way to acknowledge our dependence on Christ and show our gratitude for God's constant care.

Our Sacrifices, Our Resurrection

The ultimate end of this penitential season, the climax for which we prepare, is the most sacred time of the Church year: the three days of the Triduum — Holy (or Maundy) Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. As we celebrate the institution of the Eucharist and the Passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we enter deeply into the heart of the Paschal Mystery: that Jesus went to his death for our sins, then conquered death by his triumphant Resurrection.

In light of this glorious reality, our penances may seem small and insignificant, yet we know they are not. We may have done small things, but if we do them with love, they unite us in a very real way with the sacrifice of Jesus. Our sacrifices, when joined with those of the Lord, bring grace and healing to our world, sanctity to our souls, and a deep, enduring joy that allows us to experience "resurrection" and conversion at Easter . . . and beyond.



The Crosiers

For Further Reading

Stations of the Cross — Stations of Light. Ann Ball (Our Sunday Visitor, 2004).
Stations of the Cross for Children. Julianne Will (Our Sunday Visitor, 2005).
Stations of the Cross for the Elderly. Fr. Christopher Rengers, OFM (Our Sunday Visitor, 2005).
Stations of the Cross for Persons with Disabilities. Msgr. Thomas J. McDonnell (Our Sunday Visitor, 2007).
Experiencing the Mystery of Christ: Meditations from the Oratory. Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel (Our Sunday Visitor, 2008).

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Lent

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*the Promise
of Prayer, Fasting,
and Almsgiving*



Embracing the Cross, Enriching Life:

It may surprise modern Christians to know that the ancient practices Lent encourages have shown to be beneficial to our physical and mental, as well as spiritual, health.

✠ Meditative prayer has proven to help lower blood pressure and stress levels, contributing to better heart health and peace of mind.

✠ Refraining from overconsumption leads to a healthier body, a sharper mind, and a spirit more open to the will of God.

✠ Giving is good for your health! People who give of their time and treasure have more energy, a stronger immune system, and a sense of overall well-being.

Agnus Images

It's easy to identify a Catholic on Ash Wednesday: Our signature cross of ashes gives us away. But after Ash Wednesday, and during the forty days that follow, how do we understand and make known what it means to be Catholic? What is the significance of the "penitential period" the Church has designated as *Lent* in the liturgical year, and how do we participate in Christ's sacrifice so as to fully experience his resurrection on Easter?

The Sacrificial Season

During the season of Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday and continuing until Holy Thursday, the Church asks us to spend more time in intentional prayer, to fast and abstain from meat on designated days, and to practice charitable giving for the sake of others. Recalling Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness, we believe that our consistent participation in these practices is a form of purification that deepens our spiritual center by stripping away all that is unnecessary and by reminding us of our sole reliance on God.



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The Church emphasizes such acts of self-denial and fraternal sharing not merely for adherence to formalities or outward displays of piety, but to echo Jesus' call for conversion. Without conversion of heart, penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures, and works (CCC 1430). In one of his famous homilies, St. Peter Chrysologus (ca. 420) stressed the unity of the three spiritual practices of Lent:

There are three things, my brethren, by which faith stands firm, devotion remains constant, and virtue endures. They are prayer, fasting and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains, mercy receives. Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other.

Seen through the lens of Tradition, and founded in sacred Scripture, our Lenten journey of sacrifice works toward a purpose. Striving to understand its challenge and promise, we take up our crosses, just as we are signed with the cross at Lent's beginning, and walk the penitential road with Jesus.



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PRAYER

In these days he went out into the hills to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God (Lk 6:12).

The cross of ashes on our foreheads is a reminder that at the center of the Lenten season stands the cross. Meditating on the meaning of the Crucifixion means examining our own sinfulness and praying for the grace and courage to change our ways and walk more closely with Christ.

Throughout Lent, we are called to deepen our prayer life. For some of us, this means beginning a habit of daily prayer, setting aside time each day to share our hopes, joys, fears, and frustrations with God. Praying first thing in the morning, while the house is still quiet, or talking to God while on your commute to work are excellent ways to begin each Lenten day and encourage the practice of continual prayer.

If you have already established a daily prayer routine, Lent can be a time to broaden it and include new types of prayer or more frequent pauses in your day to pray. Praying the Rosary, visiting the Blessed Sacrament, or attending a daylong silent retreat may bring you to new places in your relationship with God. Many people incorporate prayer into their "coffee breaks" at work or use exercise or workout time to spend a few informal moments with the Lord as well.

Of course, the Sunday liturgy is the greatest form of prayer, because together we receive the gift of the Holy Eucharist — the very real presence of the Risen Christ. Attending weekly (or daily) Mass is an essential part of an active and fruitful prayer life.

FASTING

And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Mt 4:2-4).

We owe everything to the Lord, and yet it is he who will make the ultimate sacrifice for us on Good Friday. Giving up meat on Fridays and giving up full meals on other days is a small way to "carry our cross" in gratitude for the gift of eternal life. The discipline of fasting helps us recognize our true hunger — for Christ — and seek a closer relationship to him to satisfy that hunger.

Fasting, then, becomes more than merely exercising self-control; it can be spiritual and physical purification. In the Western world, fasting from food is a reminder of our abundance and a way to walk in solidarity with people around the world who struggle with daily hunger and starvation.

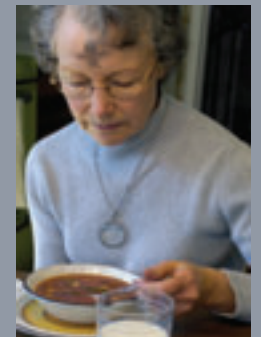
Fasting can also take the form of deliberate abstinence from the endless noisy "clutter" of our nonstop culture. Consciously limiting our intake of social media, and/or "fasting" from the twenty-four-hour news networks, can be a great help in quieting our minds for meditation and transformation. This pause in a "quiet place" also helps us combat the sins that frequently have their origins in the excess of noise and activity: anger, road rage, "workaholism," judgment, or jealousy. In this way, we move through deprivation to purification and ongoing conversion, appreciating with more depth the eventual "resurrection" to come.

Church Guidelines for Fasting and Abstinence:

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of both fast and abstinence; in the United States, all Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence.

Abstinence means eating no meat. (Milk, eggs, and fish are fine.) Fasting means eating only one normal-sized meal and two small meals, with no snacks.

Those 14 and older are required to abstain from meat; those 18-59 are required to fast, except in cases of special medical conditions that prevent fasting.



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