



Prayer. Fasting. Works of charity. These are the basics of Christian spiritual life and the three pillars of Lent. And no one knew their importance better than the saints. In fact, those countless holy



Christ Falls under the Cross, Bonsignori, Francesco (c. 1455-1519) / Palazzo Ducale, Mantua, Italy / The Bridgeman Art Library International

men and women became saints by intensifying their life of prayer, multiplying their acts of self-denial, and increasing their acts of charity to their neighbors. So every year during Lent, when the Church calls upon us to be especially

devoted to prayer, fasting, and charity, the Church urges us to imitate the saints.

## PRAYER

The Soul Can't Live Without It



Fundamentally, prayer is conversation with God. In prayer we may be praising God for his glory, thanking him for his boundless mercy to us, or asking him for his help in times of trouble. In prayer we often petition God to send us his grace so that we will do what is pleasing to him and shun what offends him and is harmful to us. But, ultimately, prayer boils down to talking with God. Conversation is essential to every human relationship — what marriage, family, or friendship could exist in total silence? In the same way, prayer is essential to the relationship between God and the human soul.



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*The saints yearned for prayer; they didn't see it as an obligation.*

## The Saints: Models of Prayer

The late Archbishop Fulton Sheen (1895-1979) was a busy man. In the 1930s and 1940s he hosted a popular weekly radio program. In the 1950s he was the star of the Emmy-winning television program *Life Is Worth Living*. He wrote more than 70 books and countless pamphlets on the Catholic faith. He was much sought after as a preacher and lecturer. He brought dozens of converts into the Church, giving each one private instruction in the faith. And for eight years he served as United States national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. Yet in spite of his exhausting schedule, every day Archbishop Sheen set aside an hour for prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. He described it as “the hour that makes my day.”

St. Zita (1218-1278) had virtually no time for herself. At age twelve she went to work as a servant for the Fatinellis, a well-to-do family in

Lucca, Italy. For 48 years she worked as their housemaid, cook, and governess of the Fatinelli children. Her days were long and full of drudgery, yet whenever she felt dejected, she said a little silent prayer, offering up her work to God, and that revived her spirits while also drawing her closer to Our Lord.

Certainly Archbishop Sheen and St. Zita longed for extended periods of conversation with God, but their daily obligations did not permit them. You may be in similar circumstances, but that doesn't mean you don't have time for prayer. If you cannot squeeze daily Mass into your schedule, say the Rosary. If you haven't time for a full Rosary, pray a decade. And be creative about your periods of prayer. Commuting by train or bus is an ideal opportunity for prayer. So is waiting in line at the supermarket, or waiting to pick up the kids at school. This Lent, look for little moments when you can pray — you'll find that they are the moments that make your day.



The Miracle of St. Zita, Strozzi, Bernardo (1581-1644) / Private Collection, Genoa, Italy / The Bridgeman Art Library International

## FASTING

The Joys of Self-Denial



When it comes to fasting, the Church insists that we be sensible. In fact, the Church has only two days of fasting in the calendar — Ash Wednesday and Good Friday — when we are permitted no more than one full meal. We may also take a little food twice during the day, but those snacks together must not comprise a full meal. Clearly, fasting, as Catholics practice it, is not a starvation diet.

Nonetheless, it is not unusual for Catholics to wonder why it matters to God whether we have one meal or three meals in a day. Of course, anything we do for love of God is pleasing to him, but fasting involves more than just pleasing God. When we abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent, and when we cut back to one meal on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, we are consciously breaking our normal routines. Those acts of self-denial recall to us the forty days Jesus fasted in the desert before he began his public ministry, and remind us of Christ's death on the cross on that first Good Friday.

In addition to the days of fasting and abstinence set down by the Church, we are also encouraged to make

personal sacrifices, popularly known as “giving something up for Lent.” Not putting sugar in your tea or cream in your coffee may seem to be a small thing, but it is a daily reminder that during the holy season of Lent we are all doing penance for our sins and striving to grow in holiness.



The Crossings



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*In a society where gratifying every desire is considered the surest road to happiness, exercising a little extra self-control is especially admirable.*

## Fasting with the Saints

All the saints practiced some form of self-denial, giving up something they enjoyed as a sign of their love for

God. St. Nicholas of Tolentino (1245-1305) was a priest of the Augustinian order. Although the Augustinians did not forbid their members to eat meat, Nicholas gave it up completely as a personal penance.

Before his conversion, St. Moses the Ethiopian (died c. 405) had a voracious appetite for meat and wine. When he entered a monastery in the Egyptian desert, he found that the rule of the community banned his two favorite things. A craving for meat and wine tormented Moses for years, but he

persevered and eventually overcame it. The struggle was essential in Moses' spiritual development because he understood that meat and wine represented his old life, when he had indulged in anything he wanted — food, drink, women, and even acts of violence.

Not only can we learn about dramatic sacrifice from the saints, they also teach us about everyday moderation and self-control. The saints understood that making small sacrifices is training for making bigger sacrifices.

## WORKS OF CHARITY

Seeing Christ in the Needy



Almsgiving, the traditional term for acts of charity performed during Lent, means specifically monetary giving. Every charity needs funds, and God is pleased every time we reach into our pockets to contribute to a good cause, so by all means during Lent increase your gifts to charities. And do not worry about the amount — remember the Gospel story of the widow who contributed a tiny coin to the Temple in Jerusalem: it