

Sure, there are times when we're so deeply hurt and frustrated by someone's behavior or certain situations that tempering our anger and doing the right thing feels like a Herculean effort. The good news is that God never asks the impossible and would never set us up to fail. Saint Paul, in the Letter to the Philippians, reminds us, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (4:13). When we invite God into these feelings, his supernatural grace prepares our souls to grow in forgiveness and frees us from the bondage of bitterness, frustration, and resentment.

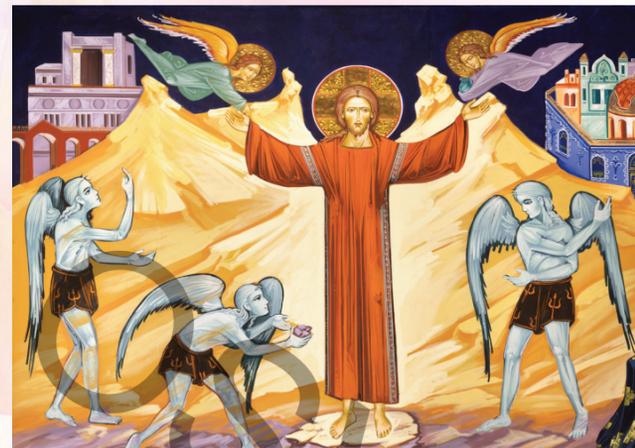
This season recalls how Jesus died upon the cross so that heaven may be opened. He conquered death so that we might live. Perhaps pray the Rosary, especially the Sorrowful Mysteries, which remind us of the true meaning of Lent.

Whatever circumstances God allows into your life, he wants us to use them for our own good and the good of others. These are trials, to be navigated with prayer, to sanctify us, not to ruin us.



The Transforming Grace of Sacrifice

Fasting builds self-control, and it trains our bodies and souls to resist temptations. We fast in imitation of Jesus' fast of forty days and forty nights (see Mt 4:1-2), which readied his heart to meet (and not give in) to the temptations of the Devil in the desert. Jesus' fast illustrates the superiority of spiritual strength, found in prayer, sacrament, and Scripture,



over any physical human power. Jesus, relying on the word of God, overcame the Devil's diabolical traps. We, through fasting and imitating Christ, can do the same.

The Devil comes to divide hearts, to put enmity between people, to stir them to friction and division. Fasting is the weapon that opens our hearts and souls to depend on God, to open our own hearts to seek God's mercy and forgiveness, which then teaches us how to extend that to others.

Sacrifices, such as fasting offered for those who hurt us, expose our wounds to an outpouring of the grace of God into the situation. No sacrifice is too small; each one builds upon the next, allowing virtue to flourish and despair to vanish.

Fast from dwelling on past conversations or painful memories. Surrender each thought to Jesus, making a conscious decision not to entertain or wallow in the thoughts and memories that cause us pain or lead us to judge or become agitated or resentful. This simple act will help us begin to heal and forgive and, most importantly, open our hearts to receive forgiveness from God.

Charity, prayer, and fasting are practices that will strengthen the ability to forgive and to receive forgiveness. These disciplines also make us more like Christ, and through which we can forgive as the Lord forgave (see Col 3:13).

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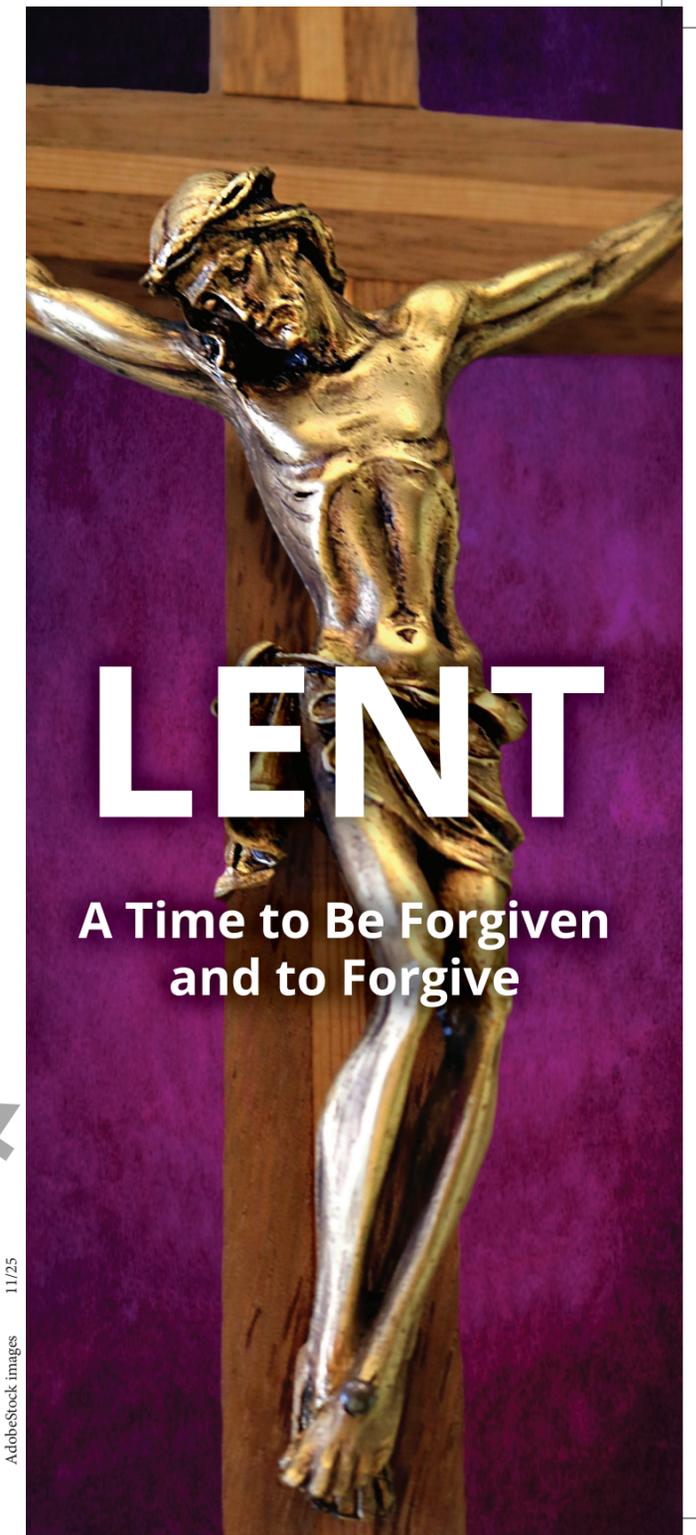
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“The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the [Church] Fathers insist above all on three forms, fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others.”

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1434*

Connecting the Lenten practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting with an effort to mend our relationship with God is a standard practice among many Catholics. Lent is a season many of the faithful will give time or treasure, pray more than usual, and abstain (and fast) from meat or favorite activities (especially on Fridays) in atonement for the trespasses committed against the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). As Pope St. John Paul II referred to it, Lent is “a time of conversion and renewed friendship with Christ.”

Therefore, what about looking at Lent as a time to learn how to grow in how we forgive trespasses against us? Believe it or not, there is a powerful, spiritual, and significant connection between the two, evident throughout the Scriptures, but in a particularly poignant way in these encounters with Jesus from the Gospel of Luke:

“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” And



he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (10:25–27)

One of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” And he said to them, “When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation.’” (11:1–4)

Jesus gives a clear response to the lawyer in the first exchange: An essential element of our entering heaven one day directly relates to how we treat our neighbor (which includes family, friends, coworkers, and, yes, even strangers). This is even more evident when Jesus answers the disciples’ question about how to pray. His words, which form the Lord’s Prayer, we continue to pray today. In it, Jesus doesn’t mince words. If we are going to come to God seeking his mercy so as to be forgiven the many ways we offend him, we must be willing to offer that same mercy to those who hurt us, from the slightest insult to more serious offenses.

Let’s look at how the three pillars of Lent — charity (almsgiving), prayer (and the sacraments), and fasting (sacrifice) — guide us to forgive others as we humbly come before God this Lent seeking his gracious mercy and forgiveness.



Charity Begins in the Heart

Charity starts first in the heart, before it can be extended to others, to those in our home or out beyond the front door and into the world.

No greater charity was shown than by Jesus upon the cross. He suffered and died to bring us this glorious, amazing gift of forgiveness of our debts and trespasses, of which the penalty without his sacrifice is death — eternally! Don’t waste this blessing or risk losing it over the behavior of another person. Selfishness, injustice, malice, and greed exist in our world, creating discontent and sadness. Be the antidote. Go out and do good, taking solace in knowing that nothing escapes God, and that he is just!



We show great charity toward those we struggle with when we genuinely pray for them to discover or strengthen a relationship with God and become who God created them to be. The condition of our heart needs always to be one of charity toward our neighbor — even those who infuriate us — to love our neighbors as ourselves, which is to want them, ultimately, to be with God in heaven forever.

A charitable act can include not automati-

cally assuming the worst of a person, giving the benefit of the doubt, and being more generous in our thoughts toward them. Every person bears the effects of original sin; our fallen nature can cause us to live in a state of doubt, pessimism, and cynicism. During Lent, practice being charitable when considering people’s motives.

Forgiveness does not always mean reconciliation. However, the Church’s teaching is very clear: We are called to extend mercy to others at all times. What is the beauty in that? It frees us, and the other, of the burden of bitterness, and most importantly it opens the heart to receive God’s forgiveness.

We can only control *how* we respond to situations that confront us. Lent is a beautiful time to grow in our own holiness by bringing our behavior to God in prayer, asking him to help us grow.



Prayer Builds a Foundation

The Sixth Commandment, “Thou shall not kill,” is one most of us probably feel we can check off our sin list. However, Jesus gives us a little more to think about in Matthew’s Gospel when he teaches, “One who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (5:22). Anger happens; however, it’s what we do with that emotion that either builds virtue or makes us subject to judgment. We can only learn to truly rechannel that anger through a relationship with God, built through prayer.