

A Personal Guide to Lent for Teens

BY RITA FERRONE



If you grew up Catholic, you're probably familiar with a lot of practices that take place during Lent. Receiving ashes on your forehead on Ash Wednesday, not eating meat on Fridays, deciding on something you want to "give up for Lent": these are things you've known since you were little. It's easy to go along when family and friends are doing these things, and not think much about them. But as time passes, we ask new questions about familiar things. We need to know why things are the way they are.

This guide explores the season of Lent, with special attention to why the things we associate with Lent are part of the Church's experience—your experience—during this time.

LENT IS A SEASON

It's important to understand that Lent is a season. This may seem obvious, but actually it's easy to miss. Lent is a season, just like summer, winter, spring, or fall. It's a period of time in which many things happen.

Why a season? Historically, Lent began in the early Church because of the people who were getting ready to be baptized at Easter. They had to have a special time period set aside for spiritual preparation. Everyone understood that Baptism

was an all-important, once-in-a-lifetime event. Those getting ready for it knew they needed to focus their attention. They had to pray. They had to fast. They had to practice charity. They had to be sure they were ready to give up their old way of life. Those who were already baptized helped them. They shared some of their preparations with them, especially prayer and fasting and giving to those in need.

Gradually, another layer of meaning was added onto Lent. Christians who had committed serious sin repented. They wanted to be received back into the community of faith and forgiven. They needed a period of time to prepare for reconciliation: to repent of their sins, show they were sorry, and change their lives. During the early centuries of the Church, reconciliation was something received only once in a lifetime. It was the one-and-only "second chance" a person had after committing serious sin. Individuals who did something terrible, such as murder or publicly renouncing their faith in Jesus, were known to the community. They could be forgiven, but it was a big deal.

SACKCLOTH AND ASHES

The penitents, as these repentant sinners were called, wore sackcloth and ashes as a sign of their sorrow for sin. They

wanted to be faithful Christians once again. They prayed and fasted and tried to make up for the wrong they had done. The Christian community, for their part, did not sit idly by. They were inspired by the sincerity of these people who wanted so much to return to God’s family and to repair the damage caused by their sin. They helped the penitents, and also tried hard to repent of their own, lesser sins, in order to show their solidarity. Eventually, everybody began to take on at least a few ashes to show that they repented of their own sins, too.

Today we understand that reconciliation can happen more than once. The Sacrament of Penance can be celebrated as often as needed. Still, it is inspiring to remember the journey of reconciliation that happened during Lent in those early centuries.

The historic roots of Lent explain its character. It began as a time to get ready—in a spiritual and authentic way—for both initiation (Baptism), on the one hand, and for reconciliation on the other. In both, it was a whole-community project, in which everybody shared certain disciplines, such as prayer and fasting and giving to those in need.

CONVERSION

Today, Lent remains true to these ancient, two-fold roots. The outward forms have evolved through history, but the inner dynamic of Lent—its spirit—remains the same. For both initiation and Reconciliation, the basic dynamic or spirit can be summed up in a single word: conversion. This is why so many Lenten practices call us to make decisions. Change takes place gradually, by the grace of God, but we have to cooperate with God’s grace. This requires a choice.

When the word conversion is used in the secular world, it might mean any change. But when this word is used to speak of Christian conversion, it means becoming more anchored in our total relationship with God—heart, mind, and action. Conversion is never just a “turning away” from something. It is always a “turning toward” something or, better yet, Someone. Lent calls us to turn toward God, to receive his grace, and to respond by the way we live.



Christian living is always new as we continue to change and grow through life. That is why we need the season of Lent every year. Lent is a time set aside to renew our conversion, to turn to God afresh—today. This may look different from when we were younger, or even how it looked just one year ago.

ASHES

When ashes are traced on your forehead on Ash Wednesday, the minister says some words. By reflecting on these words, we can better understand what the ashes mean.

Here’s the first of the two alternatives that the priest or minister might use:

Repent, and believe in the Gospel.

These words capture the spirit of conversion exactly. To repent, or turn away from sin, is to make a commitment to move toward the light of God’s goodness and truth. Our misplaced priorities, our bad habits, our failure to love God and neighbor as we should: these things need to be identified and addressed. Yet that is only part of the story. The second part of this sentence puts forward the positive side of what we have to do: believe in the Gospel. The

Gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news of God's love for the world, and for each and every person. Believing in the Gospel means letting that good news color every aspect of your life. It means joining God in loving people, and being generous with them.

The ashes are traced on your forehead in the sign of the cross. This sign reminds us that the way of discipleship always includes the cross. We share in Christ's death and resurrection by dying to self and living for God. This may sound somber, but actually it is good news. If we live for ourselves, let's face it, we will have a pretty small life. But if we live for God, we take part in the great drama of salvation that reaches to the ends of the earth. The whole universe is ours, when we belong to Christ.

The other words that might accompany the giving of ashes are:

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

In the Book of Genesis, God formed the first human being out of the clay of the ground. The "dust" was formed by God's own hands into a human person. The life of humanity is the "breath" of God himself. Wisdom begins by knowing who we are. We are creatures, not the Creator.

This statement also makes us think about our mortality—not a comfortable thought. Yet if we hear it in the right spirit, it can help us to focus on what is really important in life. Is our whole life bent on seeking things that will pass away—worrying about our appearance, achievements, or possessions? It's natural to want to look good, do well, and have nice things. But when we die, none of this will matter. What will matter is the time, love, and energy we have invested in our relationship with God, and how we have loved our neighbor. These words: "Remember that you are dust..." should jump-start a reaction in us: to put more time and attention into what is really important.

The ashes are made from the burnt palms of last year's Palm Sunday procession. What a vivid sign of how glory and honor in this world come down to nothing in the end! Yet God is eternal.

Prayer

Finding more time for prayer is one of the best things you can do for your spiritual life during Lent. Prayer is always in season, yet Lent is a special time to give more attention and time to prayer. There are many ways to pray, of course, but key to all of them is the step you take simply by saying "Yes, I am going to pray more this Lent."

Traditional Lenten practices that can encourage prayer are: frequent Mass attendance, praying the Liturgy of the Hours, receiving the Sacrament of Penance, and participating in devotions.

SUNDAY MASS

Mass on Sunday is essential because the liturgy is the central celebration of our faith. As Lent begins, do a self-check. Do you go to Mass every Sunday? What is your attitude toward going? Do you pray the Mass, or are you "somewhere else" in your thoughts even while physically present in church?



If your self-check shows there is room for improvement, don't be discouraged! There are many ways to enhance your prayer at Mass. Lent is a great time to try one or several of them. Here are a few:

- Preview the Scripture readings and prayers for the upcoming Sunday and ask, "What is the message for me today?" Think about one message you hear, among many. Let it resonate in your spirit. You can find the Scripture readings here: www.usccb.org/bible/readings/
- Get to church a bit earlier than usual and open your heart to God, giving thanks for the good things of the preceding week. Put your personal needs before God in silent prayer before Mass begins.
- Participate in a *Living the Eucharist* discipleship group for teens. Sharing faith with others in your age group can be enlightening and will make a difference in how you pray at Sunday Mass.

Whatever helps you to participate more fruitfully in Sunday liturgy, make an effort to do it during Lent. The readings, rites, and themes of the liturgy are rich during this time.

You will probably pray for the elect in your parish, as they prepare for Baptism at the Easter Vigil. There are special liturgical rites for them on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent, in which you will participate as part of the congregation. The elect need our prayers. They also

ELECT is the term, used only in Lent, for those catechumens who are preparing for Baptism at the Easter Vigil. They begin to be called "the elect" at the Rite of Election, which takes place on or near the First Sunday of Lent, usually at a diocesan liturgy. The elect may be adults, teens, or children the age of seven and older, who have participated in the RCIA. The term "elect" means they have been chosen by God and the Church to receive the sacraments this Easter.

There are special liturgical rites called the **SCRUTINIES**. Through the Scrutiny rites, the elect gain enlightenment concerning human sinfulness—a reality that sometimes drags us down. We pray that the elect will be liberated from anything that might keep them from fully embracing Christ and the new life of Baptism. We also gain insight for ourselves into the nature of sin and the promise of redemption that Jesus offers.

offer something to us: the witness of their sincere desire for Baptism into Christ Jesus. They need our example of faith in return.

WHAT'S MISSING DURING LENT?

Some things that are in the liturgy the rest of the year are NOT present during Lent. The Alleluia is gone. The Glory to God disappears. Decorations are kept to a minimum. The music of Lent is less festive than at other times of the year. Many parishes cut back on the use of musical instruments. In fact, the whole atmosphere of the liturgy is altered to become more quiet, reflective, and sober. The penitential color, purple, predominates. The Fourth Sunday of Lent is a little more cheerful (rose-colored vestments, flowers, and some festive music is permitted), but for the most part Lent is a down-to-essentials, serious time.

The absence of the Alleluia and the presence of the color purple are not just window-dressing. They really matter. Why? Because the liturgy sets the tone for our whole experience of the season. When the liturgy feels different through these outward signs, we know something significant is supposed to happen within us, too. The changes, you may have noticed, all have a certain seriousness or gravity. By making room for more silence and reflection, the liturgy is encouraging us to become more aware of our need for conversion. By removing some of the joyful expressions from our worship, we become

aware of the empty space—in our hearts and in our lives—where we long for God. This is a holy longing, and we need to get in touch with it during Lent.

DAILY MASS AND THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

Participating in the Eucharist on weekdays as well as on Sundays can be a great way to deepen your prayer life. If daily Mass is available and you can go, do it. It's a way to grow closer to Jesus and be strengthened in faith.

The Liturgy of the Hours is a beautiful expression of daily prayer, centered on the psalms. Some parishes celebrate Morning and Evening Prayer all year. Others schedule it only during certain seasons, such as Lent. It can also be prayed alone.

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

As Lent unfolds, and we focus on our desire for a fresh encounter with the living God, we begin to examine our conscience and ask, "Where are my roadblocks?" The Sacrament of Penance is a wonderful opportunity to get past those roadblocks and experience forgiveness, joy, and peace. Many parishes offer, sometime during Lent, a communal celebration of reconciliation, with time for individual confessions. Individual confessions can also be made at the regularly scheduled time in the parish, or by appointment with a priest.

When you receive absolution after you have confessed your sins, notice the profound words the priest says:

*God, the Father of mercies,
through the death and resurrection of his Son
has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.*

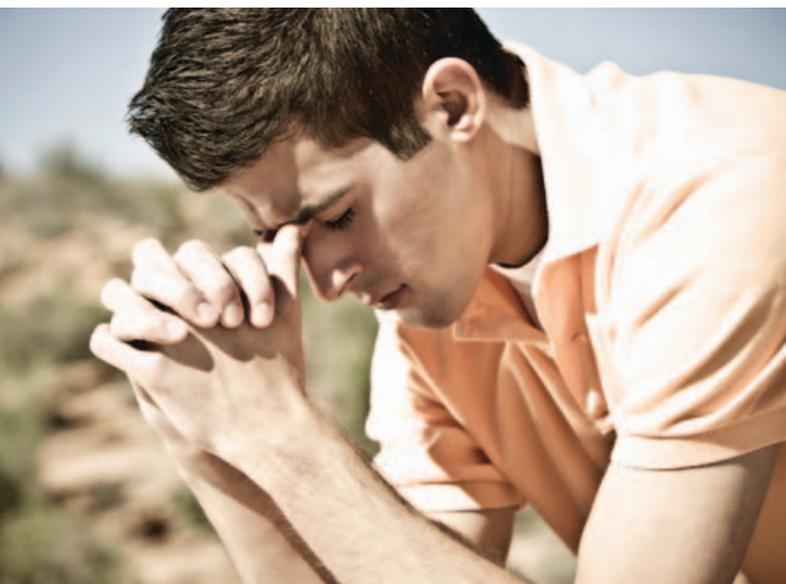
The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—the Paschal Mystery—is the foundation of reconciliation. There's no better time to celebrate this sacrament than when we are getting ready for Easter.



LENTEN DEVOTIONS

Devotions help us to relate to the mysteries of salvation on a feeling level. One of the most popular devotions among Catholics during Lent is the Stations of the Cross. It is a way to meditate on the episodes of the Passion, and to see how the walk of our own life brings us into step with the redemptive suffering of Jesus. There are various ways to practice this devotion. Some are subdued and quiet. Others are bold and creative—including drama, music, and reflections on contemporary issues. Many parishes pray the Stations of the Cross on the Fridays of Lent.

Other Lenten devotions include: reading the Passion of Christ in Scripture, watching Passion Plays, singing Lenten hymns, veneration of the cross, processions with the cross, devotions to the wounds of Christ or to one of the specific incidents of the Passion, and the *Via Matris*, based on the seven sorrows of Mary.



PRAYER IN SECRET

There is more to Lent than public observances. We must follow the advice of our Lord in the Gospel when he says, “When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you... Do not let your left hand know what your right is doing” (Matthew 6:2–3). His advice concerning prayer is similar: “When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (Matthew 6:6).

Fasting and Abstinence

On two days of the year, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, all Catholics who are able to fast are asked to do so. Fasting means eating only one full meal. If necessary, you can eat two smaller meals, too, but basically it’s one meal, and no snacks or munching through the day. Voluntary fasting also can take place on other days. For example, everyone is encouraged to fast on Holy Saturday, though it’s not required.

REASONS FOR FASTING

Why fast? Fasting is an ancient discipline practiced by Christians through the ages. It’s tempting to see fasting as a kind of diet, but that’s not what it’s about. Our fasting

has a spiritual purpose. By foregoing food for a time, Christians affirm: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). We fast to clear our mind and to turn our thoughts to God. That is why Jesus fasted in the desert, and why many people fast today.

Although the ultimate purpose of fasting is spiritual, there is also something very physical about an empty stomach. What do we make of this? When we fast, we experience hunger. We are voluntarily sharing a feeling that millions of people know when they are deprived of food—because of poverty, natural disaster, or war. Compassion for those who lack the necessities of life can arise out of our experience of fasting.

ABSTINENCE ON LENTEN FRIDAYS

Abstinence means not eating meat. Abstinence from meat is expected of all Catholics on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all the Fridays of Lent. Why not eat meat? Traditionally, meat has been considered a luxury food, so not eating meat is linked to “simple fare” and solidarity with the poor.

For many people today, giving up meat isn’t a huge sacrifice in itself. What is challenging is remembering to do it. Above all, it requires being mindful that Fridays are special, which leads us back to the spiritual purpose of the exercise. Why abstain on Fridays? In the cycle of the week, Friday is the day we remember the Passion and death of Jesus, undertaken out of love for all sinners. It’s appropriate to share the symbolic gesture of abstinence as a form of self-denial and penance on that day.

GIVING UP SOMETHING FOR LENT

The practice of “giving up something for Lent” is actually a variation on the theme of fasting and abstinence. It’s a personal decision to practice self-denial in some way that is particular to you. What you give up doesn’t have to be a type of food. It could be anything nonessential that you normally would enjoy.

It should be something you like, however, not something you didn’t want (or want to do) in the first place. Why? Because

the practice is intended to teach us self-discipline. Human beings want things all the time. If we could look inside each person's heart, we would find a mass of longings, some very confused, all very demanding. The Christian, in order to be truly free, needs to learn how to sort through those longings and master them, so as not to be mastered by them. Have you ever seen a two-year-old throw a tantrum because he wants something? If we don't learn self-discipline, we remain, on the inside, just like that two-year-old. On the other hand, if we practice gentleness and self-control, little by little we grow more truly free and responsible.

Learning how to give up something, freely and with good grace, is a necessary step toward maturity. But it is also something more. The Lenten practice of self-denial, or "giving up something," can be an occasion to become a giver.

Most of us have more than we need. Yet when we are focused on our wants, we can end up feeling very needy. Our consumer culture encourages us to always want more. If we practice self-discipline, however, everything looks different. To our surprise, we discover that we have enough. We can afford to be generous. People who give up something for Lent enjoy a fresh opportunity to give something. If you give up some entertainment, suddenly you have that time available. You could help somebody who needs a hand. If you give up sweets or some other treat, guess what? The money you would have spent could make a donation to a charity. And so on.

In short, giving up something for Lent doesn't have to be a sad experience. It can be a doorway to becoming a happier and more generous person.

New Life at Easter

 n Holy Thursday, the Lenten season ends and the Triduum begins. The liturgy marks the change vividly. At the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening, the vestments and altar coverings are no longer purple. Instead, they are festive white. The *Gloria* returns, with bells! The Alleluia will return only at the Easter Vigil,

The **TRIDUUM** is the three-day celebration of Christ's Passover from death to resurrection. The Triduum is the high point of the whole liturgical year. Also called the Paschal Triduum or the Easter Triduum, it begins with the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, continues through the celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday, reaches its climax at the Easter Vigil on the night of Holy Saturday, and flows through the Masses of Easter day. The Triduum closes with Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday.

yet already there is a new atmosphere, clearly different from that of Lent.

Churches are filled with flowers at Easter because they are a sign of new life. The paschal candle burns brightly as a sign of Christ's risen life. But the greatest sign of new life at Easter is Baptism. The newly baptized, and those who have renewed their baptismal promises, are the bearers of light and life during the Easter season. When you renew your baptismal promises, you too become a living sign that Christ is risen. He is alive!

Here's how it works. For forty days we've followed the disciplines of Lent: praying, fasting, and giving to those in need. We've gotten down to basics. We've asked for forgiveness of our sins. We've realized how blessed we are to have a relationship with a God who loves us. We've strengthened our discipleship. These are movements of faith. What we may not realize immediately, however, is that all these movements of faith are building up to something.

That something is Easter—Easter within us, Easter among us, and Easter in the whole world. Even nature takes part in the celebration, as the date of Easter depends on the sun and the moon in the coming of the Spring equinox in the northern hemisphere! When we reach the Paschal Triduum, something profound happens, for which Lent has made us ready: Christ's victory becomes ours. As St. Paul



QUESTIONS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- 1 ■ What do you like about the Lenten season? What do you find difficult or off-putting about it? What mood or theme do you associate with Lent at this time in your life?
- 2 ■ Do you prefer Lenten practices that you share with others, or ones that you pursue on your own? What kind of Lenten experiences “feed” you? Think of a few examples. Are you open to new experiences?
- 3 ■ Have you ever gone through Lent doing nothing at all to engage with the season? What did Easter feel like after such a Lent? Now recall a Lenten season when you took part in the season actively. What was Easter like after that experience?
- 4 ■ From what you know through experience and what you have read here, compare Lent and Easter. How are they different? Think of an image or a slogan that expresses that difference for you. Keep that image or slogan in mind as you experience Lent this year, while looking forward to Easter.

says in his Letter to the Romans: “We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

After the Resurrection, the first gift of Jesus to his disciples is the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). The Easter season then allows a full fifty days to celebrate the Spirit, to rejoice in the Spirit’s presence in our lives, and to affirm the gifts of the Risen Christ in Word and Sacrament, especially in the Eucharist. The Easter season extends the joy of Easter all the way up to the celebration of Pentecost. Christ is risen indeed—alleluia!

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