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## Guide to Lent

Living the Penitential Season Well

### WHAT IS LENT?

BY CLAIRE DWYER

Lent is a season marked by purification and penance in preparation for the summit of the entire liturgical year: the sacred Easter Triduum of the passion and resurrection of the Lord. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and consists of 40 days of fasting and prayer. (Sundays are excluded.)

It is the time when the faithful, through sacrifice and mortification, prepare to renew their baptismal promises, or, in the case of catechumens, prepare for the sacraments of initiation, through the Rite of Election, scrutinies and catechesis.

The Church Fathers, including St. Leo the Great and St. Cyril of Alexandria, indicated that Lent had been observed since the time of the apostles, although it did not become regularized until after Christianity was legalized in 313. By the end of the fourth century, the 40-day period of Lent existed as a specific time of Easter preparation constituted by increased prayer and fasting.

*“The annual Lenten season is the fitting time to climb the holy mountain of Easter.”*

— Ceremonial of Bishops

### Did You Know?

This season of penance leading up to Easter is called *Quadragesima* in Latin, which means “Fortieth.” The word “Lent” comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning “spring.”

### Signs and Symbols

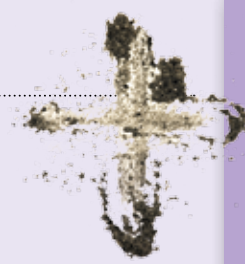
# 40

■ The 40-day timeframe of Lent is no arbitrary number. Biblically, the **No. 40** has always had a special significance regarding preparation and denotes a period of time that leads to something extraordinary:

- † Noah endured the rains for 40 days during the Flood.
- † Moses stayed on Mount Sinai and fasted for 40 days and 40 nights as he prepared to receive the Ten Commandments.
- † The Jews wandered for 40 years in the desert before arriving in the Promised Land.
- † The prophet Elijah fasted for 40 days on Mount Horeb.
- † Most importantly, Jesus himself fasted for 40 days before beginning his public ministry.
- † “By the solemn 40 days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 540).

■ The use of **ashes** on Ash Wednesday also has biblical origins. In Scripture, ashes symbolize mourning, mortality and penance — all things to keep in the forefront of our thoughts, prayers and practices during Lent.

- † It was common practice for a penitent sinner or city to return to God in sackcloth and ashes, as seen in such books of the Bible as Esther, Daniel, Jonah and Job.
- † Jesus himself said, “If the miracles worked in you had taken place in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago” (Matthew 11:21).
- † The practice of dressing in sackcloth and ashes as a sign of conversion and sorrow for sins continued in early Christianity. At times in the early Church, the priest would sprinkle ashes on the foreheads of the faithful as they were leaving confession.



Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season. Traditionally, the faithful receive ashes in the shape of a cross on their foreheads to mark the entrance of the “time established for the purification of their souls. ... It signifies the human condition of the sinner, who seeks to express his guilt before the Lord in an exterior manner, and by doing so express his interior conversion, led on by the confident hope that the Lord will be merciful.” — *Ceremonial of Bishops*

The ashes used on Ash Wednesday come from the blessed palms from the prior year’s Palm Sunday celebration. The ashes are blessed, mixed with holy water, and used to mark the foreheads of the faithful with the words, “**Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel,**” or “**Remember, you are dust, and to dust you shall return.**”

### PENANCES



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### Suggested Sacrifices to Make During Lent

- Don’t buy anything you don’t need; use the saved money for almsgiving.
- Forgo soft drinks, desserts or other sweets.
- Give up coffee.
- Refrain from eating between meals or after dinner.
- Omit eating out.
- Cut out social media, television, radio and podcasts and find time for silence.
- Reject the snooze button. Get up early to pray.



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### Suggested Spiritual Practices and Disciplines to Add During Lent

- Daily Mass
- Daily Mass readings
- Holy Hour once a week
- Spiritual reading
- Daily Divine Mercy Chaplet
- Daily Rosary or decade of the Rosary, particularly the Sorrowful Mysteries



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### Walking With Jesus

The Stations of the Cross is a particularly appropriate devotion for Lent.

*“Lent is the time for greater love.”*

— St. Teresa of Calcutta



Jesus Is Condemned to Death



Jesus Bears His Cross



Jesus Falls the First Time



Jesus Meets His Afflicted Mother



Simon Helps Jesus Carry His Cross



Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus



Jesus Falls the Second Time



Jesus Speaks to the Holy Women



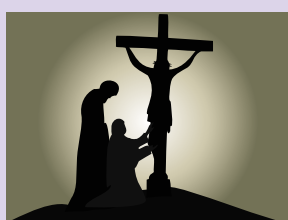
Jesus Falls the Third Time



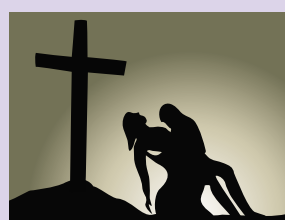
Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments



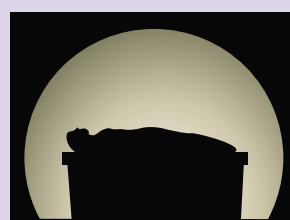
Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross



Jesus Dies on the Cross



Jesus Is Taken Down From the Cross



Jesus Is Laid in the Tomb

To pray the Stations of the Cross with devotions written by Mother Angelica, visit [EWTN.com/Devotionals/Stations/face.htm](http://EWTN.com/Devotionals/Stations/face.htm)

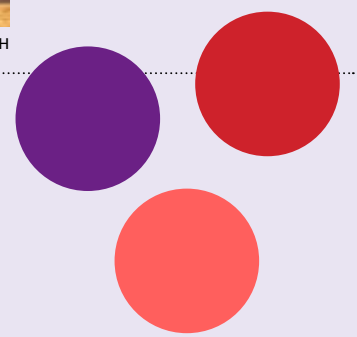
STATIONS OF THE CROSS IMAGES SHUTTERSTOCK

### A PARTICULARLY LENTEN SACRAMENT



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The faithful are especially encouraged to make use of the sacrament of penance, or confession, more frequently during Lent. During this season of conversion, it is wise to make greater use of the sacrament since it is one of the greatest means of conversion. For an examination of conscience and act of contrition, see [EWTN.com/library/prayer/examconscience.htm](http://EWTN.com/library/prayer/examconscience.htm).



### The Colors of Lent

The color **violet** or **purple** is the primary color used in the Lenten season. It represents repentance as well as the royalty of Christ. For the Fourth Sunday of Lent, *Laetare* Sunday, **rose** vestments are worn as a sign of joy, anticipating Easter.

**Red**, symbolizing the shedding of blood, is used on Palm Sunday, to commemorate how Christ entered Jerusalem to begin his passion, and Good Friday.

### Fasting and Abstinence

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are obligatory days of fasting and abstinence for Catholics. In addition, Fridays during Lent are obligatory days of abstinence.

For members of the Latin Catholic Church, the norms on fasting are obligatory from age 18 until age 59. When fasting, a person is permitted to eat one full meal, as well as two smaller meals that together are not equal to a full meal. The norms concerning abstinence from meat are binding upon members of the Latin Catholic Church from age 14 onwards. — *U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops*



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*“What do the scars of Christ teach us? They teach us that life is a struggle: that our condition of a final resurrection is exactly the same as his; that unless there is a cross in our lives, there will never be an empty tomb; that unless there is a Good Friday, there will never be an Easter Sunday; that unless there is a crown of thorns, there will never be a halo of light; and that unless we suffer with him, we shall not rise with him.”*

— Archbishop Fulton Sheen