

## LENT

The Church traditionally announces the important dates of the year on Epiphany Sunday. The key one is the solemnity of the Resurrection of Jesus, Easter Day—on April 16 this year.

Closely tied to that is the forty-day period of Lent that begins on Ash Wednesday, March 1—ten days from now. Lent's purpose is to reorder the lives of the disciples of Jesus where they went astray. The time-honoured ways to draw nearer to God in Lent are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

The genius of these dependable Christian practices is how they acknowledge our spiritual and physical natures in our yearning for God.

Purposely spending more time in prayer helps us step back from the pressing demands of busy lives. Then, we can better hear and respond to God's quiet voice in the present.

St. Mother Teresa once remarked, "Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depth of our hearts." Being intentional about listening to God is a basic Lenten practice.

Fasting and routinely abstaining from meat are important aspects of a Catholic's devotional life. Catholics are to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and the Fridays of Lent. We are to fast (eat only one full meal) on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. This expresses our desire for personal renewal at the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday. We show gratitude for the Lord Jesus' gift of his life for us on Fridays, especially Good Friday.

Other traditional acts of "giving up" sweets, alcohol, tobacco or other pleasures during Lent help us personalize our spirit of sacrifice. We "turn from sin and believe the Good News."

Fasting isn't about dieting to shrink our waistline for a new spring wardrobe! Rather, it is about disciplining ourselves by saying "no" to things we like—to build up our spiritual will. This strengthens us to avoid other temptations to wrongdoing.

Fasting also expresses solidarity with our many fellow humans who go to bed hungry or thirsty each night. The Lenten fast, with its small hunger twinges, motivates us to help the truly hungry.

Almsgiving or charity is the practice of intentionally sacrificing a little of our own comfort and lives of abundance. We share with those who are in genuine need. This is an essential Lenten discipline. Sacrificial giving releases us from the idolatry of materialism. Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us that when we clothe the naked, feed the hungry, or assuage the thirst of another person, we do it to him (Matthew 25:31–41).

Almsgiving flows from saving money by these sacrifices. We should care especially for the needy near and far. We can take part in our parish's social outreach. We can also support the Lenten campaign for the poor of the world conducted by Development and Peace, founded fifty years ago by the Bishops of

Canada to promote social justice in the Global South. Being other-centred by purposely giving to charity connects our innate need to help with our recognition that we are all God's children.

Finally, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a big part of our quest for holiness. The Church urges Catholics to make a good confession each year during the days surrounding Easter. The practice of confession is a major impetus to spiritual growth.

Ultimately, Lent is the Church's gift to Christians, not a seasonal punishment. It helps us prepare more worthily and joyfully to celebrate the most profound moment in our personal life and the history of the cosmos—the Passion, Death and, Resurrection of Jesus Christ!