

LENT: THE PERIOD OF PURIFICATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Then I proclaimed a fast there, ... that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a straight way for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. ~ Ezra 8:21

LENT IS A FORTY-DAY LITURGICAL SEASON prior to Easter. It is called Lent in English only because "lenten" is an old English word for Spring, which is the season of year when this forty-day preparation occurs for those who live in the Northern Hemisphere.

This forty-day period was set aside as a period for spiritual preparation for those initiates preparing for the Easter sacraments. The Year A Gospel readings for Lent depict scenes of Jesus' life and ministry that illustrate the powerful conversion that comes when encountering him. The encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well, with the man born blind, and with Lazarus

in the tomb are especially important for the initiates who are preparing to encounter Jesus in the Easter sacraments. Just as the woman at the well receives living water, the blind man sight, and Lazarus life, Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and through the sacraments of initiation brings new life to those who are spiritually dead, new sight to those who are spiritually blind, and a spiritual drink to those who thirst for him. *"[W]hoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14).*

Although Lent

originally developed exclusively for those entering the Church, it was not long before the Church perceived the spiritual benefit for such a preparation for all the faithful. While keeping its original focus on Easter and the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, the Church invites all Christians into this period of renewal and reconciliation; it is a time for each Christian to reflect on his or her own baptismal promises to reject Satan and turn away from sin. *"Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than much with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to treasure up gold" (Tb 12:8).* This admonition is the foundation

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of the Lenten practices that characterize Catholics seeking to strengthen their walk

with God and deepen their relationship with him.

Before celebrating the greatest events in Christ's life — his Passion, death, and Resurrection — the

Church calls us to repentance and

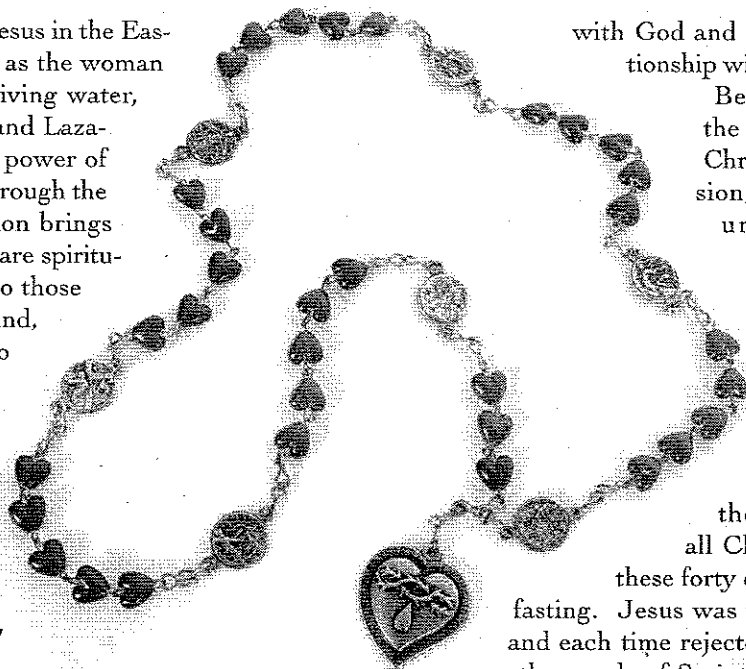
conversion.

Much in the way Christ went out into the desert to

pray and fast,

the Church invites all Christians to spend

these forty days in prayer and fasting. Jesus was tempted by Satan and each time rejected Satan by using the words of Scripture. We, too, are reminded that a time of greater prayer



A special rosary to help a person meditate specifically on the blood that Jesus shed for us while on earth



*St. Lawrence distributing the treasures of the Church to the faithful,
by Fra Angelico, 1387-1455*

and fasting is also a time for spiritual battle. Turning to God in prayer and meditating on his Word in Scripture will sustain us through this time and prepare us for the great feast of Easter.

The Church encourages fasting on all Fridays of the year in honor of our Lord's death, but requires it only on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, and on Good Friday, although the faithful are encouraged to fast every weekday of Lent. While it is true that fasting is always associated with penance, it should not be looked upon negatively. It is a form of self-denial but also a way of drawing closer to God. Why? Our lives have become so busy and cluttered that God gets less and less of our time. Through prayer and denying ourselves some things, we make more room in our hearts for God. The emphasis on

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fasting is not on being hungry but learning to live with less. Fasting helps us become more singularly devoted in our hearts to God and strengthens our will. Our hearts are freer to make more room for God because we become less dependent on material things and less bound to the satisfaction they bring.

Fasting can take many forms and many different devotional practices have grown up around it. Traditionally, on a fast day like Ash Wednesday or Good Friday, the Church obliges the Christian to abstain from more than one full meal in the day.

Almsgiving is another form of self-denial, that of sharing what we have generously with the poor. Once when Jesus was teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem, *“he sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living’”* (Mk 12:41-45). The more almsgiving is denial of what we ourselves desire so that we might help meet others' needs, the more it is pleasing to God.

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