

LENT *and*
EASTER
WISDOM

—— *from* ——

FULTON J. SHEEN

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Daily Scripture and Prayers
Together With Sheen's Own Words

A Redemptorist Pastoral Publication



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Epigraph

THERE HAS NEVER yet been a bomb invented that is half so powerful as one mortal sin—and yet there is no positive power in sin, only negation, only annihilation.

THOMAS MERTON

THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN

Introduction

MOST CATHOLICS seem to be aware of the forty-day period before the feast of Easter. Lent, which comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning “spring,” is a time marked by particular rituals, such as the reception of ashes on Ash Wednesday or the decision to “give up French fries” as a Lenten practice. Is Lent broader than just these practices which seem to be left over from another era?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LENT

In the first three centuries of the Christian experience, preparation for the Easter feast usually covered a period of one or two days, perhaps a week at the most. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons even speaks of a forty-hour preparation for Easter.

The first reference to Lent as a period of forty days’ preparation occurs in the teachings of the First Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 and, by the end of the fourth century, a Lenten period of forty days was established and accepted.

In its early development, Lent quickly became associated with the sacrament of baptism, since Easter was the great baptismal feast. Those who were preparing to be baptized participated in the season of Lent in preparation for the reception of the sacrament of baptism. Eventually, those who were already baptized considered it important to join those candidates preparing for baptism in their preparations for Easter. The customs and practices of Lent as we know them today soon took hold.

LENT AS A JOURNEY

Lent is often portrayed as a journey, from one point in time to another point in time. The concept of journey is obvious for those experiencing the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), the program of baptismal preparation conducted in most parishes during the season of Lent.

But Lenten preparation is not limited to those who are preparing to be baptized and join the Church. For many Catholics, Lent is a journey that is measured from Ash Wednesday through Easter Sunday, but, more accurately, Lent is measured from Ash Wednesday to the beginning of the period of time known as the Triduum.

Triduum begins with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, and closes with the proclamation of the *Exsultet*, "Rejoice O Heavenly Powers," during the Mass of Holy Saturday.

By whatever yardstick the journey is measured, it is not only the period of time that is important but the essential experiences of the journey that are necessary for a full appreciation of what is being celebrated.

The Lenten journey is also a process of spiritual growth and, as such, presumes movement from one state of being to another state. For example, some people may find themselves troubled and anxious at the beginning of Lent as a result of a life choice or an unanswered question, and, at the end of Lent, they may fully expect a sense of conversion, a sense of peace, or perhaps simply understanding and acceptance. In this sense, Lent is a movement from one point of view to another or, perhaps, from one interpretation of life to a different interpretation.

Scripture, psalms, prayers, rituals, practices, and penance are the components of the Lenten journey. Each component, tried and

tested by years of tradition, is one of the “engines” that drives the season and which brings the weary traveler to the joys of Easter.

PENITENTIAL NATURE OF LENT

A popular understanding of Lent is that it is a penitential period of time during which people attempt to become more sensitive to the role of sin in their lives. Lenten sermons will speak of personal sin, coming to an awareness of the sins of others and the effect such sin might have, and, finally, the sin that can be found within our larger society and culture. Awareness of sin, however, is balanced by an emphasis on the love and acceptance that God still has for humanity, despite the sinful condition in which we still find ourselves.

Awareness of sin and the need for penance is emphasized through the practice of meditation on the Passion of the Lord, his suffering, and his death. There is also a traditional concern for the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation during Lent. Originally, the sacrament of reconciliation was celebrated before Lent began, the penance imposed on Ash Wednesday, and the prescribed penance was performed during the entire forty-day period.

SUMMONS TO PENITENTIAL LIVING

“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mk 1:14–15). This call to conversion announces the solemn opening of Lent. Participants are marked with ashes, and the words, “Repent, and believe in the good news,” are prayed. This blessing is understood as a personal acceptance of the desire to take on the life of penance for the sake of the Gospel.



For forty days, the example of Jesus in the desert fasting and praying is imitated. It is time to center attention on conversion. During Lent, the expectation is to examine our lives and, through the practice of prayer, fasting, and works of charity, seek to conform our lives to Christ's. For some, this conversion will be a turning from sin to grace. For others, it will be a gracious turning toward the mystery of God in Christ. Whatever the pattern chosen by a particular pilgrim for an observance of Lent, it is hoped that this book will provide a useful support in the effort.



PART I



READINGS *for*
LENT



DAY 1

Ash Wednesday

A NEW START

God, in his great mercy, has instituted the sacrament by which the sins committed after baptism may be remitted. No human being would ever have thought of this sacrament [of reconciliation] for it is something like a resurrection; we rise after we are dead. It is a journey back again to God. It enables us to get rid of infections before they become chronic diseases and epidemics. The sacrament of reconciliation is the inflowing of God's mercy, an opportunity for the increase of the grace of Calvary. It is a medicine for the soul, the healing of our wounds, a homecoming, an undoing of the past; an opportunity to get a fresh start in life, another bath, a kind of secondary baptism.

FULTON J. SHEEN, AUDIO TAPE, "SIN"

CHANGE OF HEART

*Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing....
Call a solemn assembly;
gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast....
Between the vestibule and the altar,
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD."*

JOEL 2:12–17

PRAYER

Lord, encourage us in this season of Lent to arise from the sickness of sin. As the cross of ashes is traced on our foreheads on this day, may we be reminded that Christ's conquest of death is our entrance to a new life. We pray that our observance of this season will show us worthy of his sacrifice. Amen.

LENTEN ACTION

As Peter Chrysologus writes, "Fasting is the soul of prayer." Select a habit or attitude from which to "fast" as part of your spiritual program for Lent.





DAY 2

Thursday After Ash Wednesday

IT'S NOT MY FAULT!

The worse sinners are nice people who, by denying sin, make the cure of sin impossible. Sin is very serious, but it is more serious to deny sin. That is why those who very often deny sin become scandal mongers, tale bearers, and hypocritics, because they have to project their real guilt outside of themselves to others. And this gives them, also, a great illusion of goodness. It will be found generally true that the increase of fault finding is in direct proportion to the denial of sin.

FULTON J. SHEEN, AUDIO TAPE, "SIN"

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

You...must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus....Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life.

ROMANS 6:11–13

PRAYER

Lord Creator, we take this first step of our Lenten journey by admitting our sinfulness. We work to remove the ashes of sin from our souls. Shine the light of your grace on us so that we may be wise people in your service. Amen.

LENTEN ACTION

Eat an apple today as a symbol of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.





DAY 3

Friday After Ash Wednesday

WHY SHOULD WE PRAY?

Well, why breathe? We have to take in fresh air and get rid of bad air; we have to take in new power and get rid of our old weaknesses....Just as a battery sometimes runs down and needs to be charged, so we have to be renewed in spiritual vigor. Our Blessed Lord said: "Without me you can do nothing." O yes, we can eat and drink, and we can sin, but we cannot do anything toward our supernatural merit and heaven without him.

FULTON J. SHEEN, AUDIO TAPE, "PRAYER IS A DIALOGUE"

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