

**Fast,
Pray,
Give**
**Making
the
Most
of
Lent**

a six-week guide

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Introduction

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets.... But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners...go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting...put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not

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by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

—Matthew 6:1–8, 16–18

Catechism Quote

The New Law *practices the acts of religion*: almsgiving, prayer and fasting, directing them to the “Father who sees in secret,” in contrast with the desire to “be seen by men.” Its prayer is the Our Father.¹

—CCC, 1969

Fast, Pray, Give: Making the Most of Lent is designed to help you learn more about the customs and practices of Lent, as well as the Catholic teaching behind these. It is about growing spiritually during Lent, especially through using the traditional Lenten practices of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. But we’ll take those practices one step further in this book: Instead of focusing simply on their traditional meaning, we’ll give each of them a fresh perspective by placing them in the context of simplicity, spirituality, and stewardship. These latter three disciplines

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are important to the life of Catholics today, and are essential components of an engaged faith.

- **Simplicity** calls us to focus more on what we need, and less on what we want. It is doing without the excesses of modern life, and living in accordance with Jesus's words in Luke 14:33: "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

- **Spirituality** is the way we live out our faith. It shapes our lifestyle and determines our ways of prayer, as well as how we worship God.

- **Stewardship** is the free gift of our time, talent, and treasure. It is how we use our God-given talents and abilities in Christian service to one another.

Each chapter in *Fast, Pray, Give* opens with a Scripture passage from the Gospel for that Sunday in Lent; the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays use the Year A readings, in keeping with the RCIA. A quote from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is next, giving context from Church teaching to what is presented in the chapter. Next you'll find background material on the

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topic for that week, followed by two questions for reflection and discussion to help better bring the subject matter into your own life. The section titled “Inspiration From the Saints” offers further fruit for contemplation, while the Practice and Prayer sections give you inspiration to go out into the world with what you have learned in that particular chapter.

Fast, Pray, Give uses as its foundation content from *Catholic Update* newsletters. The main section of each of the chapters is adapted from a particular *Update* that you’ll find noted at the end of that section. The section “Inspiration From the Saints” is taken from “Saints: Holy and Human,” *Catholic Update*, by Michael D. Guinan, while the “Practice” comes from *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent*, by Richard Rohr. All of these *Updates*—and many more that deal with topics pertinent to Lent—are available from Franciscan Media and can further enhance your Lenten prayer and practice.

Finally, there is a companion DVD available for use with this book. It offers additional information on Lent and brief commentaries on the Year A Gospels that can be used with this six-week study guide, especially in conjunction with the RCIA.

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There is more information in the Leader's Guide on how to use the DVD with this book.

May this joyful season of Lent bring you to a deeper understanding of your faith, and a richer practice of its Lenten customs and traditions. By following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and the teaching of the Church, let us join together to become stronger disciples and a faith-filled people who can negotiate through the Lenten desert into the Easter light of Resurrection.

| WEEK ONE |

What Is Lent?

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of
God....’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him,

“Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

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Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

—Matthew 4:1–4, 8–11

Catechism Quote

Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, "sackcloth and ashes," fasting and mortification, but at the *conversion of the heart, interior conversion*. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance.²

—CCC, 1430

How is the emphasis on conversion and penance found in this quote from the *Catechism* different or the same from your understanding of Lent?

WEEK ONE: WHAT IS LENT?

It All Starts With Baptism

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has reemphasized the baptismal character of Lent, especially through the restoration of the catechumenate and its Lenten rituals. Our challenge is to renew our understanding of this important season of the Church year and see how we can integrate our personal practices into this renewed perspective.

Lent as a forty-day season developed in the fourth century from three merging sources. The first was the ancient paschal fast that began as a two-day observance before Easter but was gradually lengthened to forty days. The second was the catechumenate as a process of preparation for baptism, including an intense period of preparation for the sacraments of initiation to be celebrated at Easter.

The third was the order of penitents, which was modeled on the catechumenate and sought a second conversion for those who had fallen back into serious sin after baptism. As the catechumens (candidates for baptism) entered their final period of preparation for baptism, the penitents and the rest of the

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community accompanied them on their journey and prepared to renew their baptismal vows at Easter.

Prior to Vatican II, Lent was all about self-denial, suffering, and the death of Christ in bloody agony on the cross. When the council issued the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy in 1963, the bishops called for the renewal of the season of Lent:

The season of Lent has a twofold character: primarily by recalling or preparing for baptism and by penance, it disposes the faithful, who more diligently hear the word of God and devote themselves to prayer, to celebrate the paschal mystery. This twofold character is to be brought into greater prominence.... Hence, more use is to be made of the baptismal features proper to the Lenten liturgy....³

The council's reference to the baptismal character of Lent seemed strange to many people at the time, who had not been trained to link baptism and Lent in their minds or in their devotional practices. Yet Lent is fundamentally baptismal in its origins and its meaning.

WEEK ONE: WHAT IS LENT?

Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving

The three traditional pillars of Lenten observance are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Prayer during Lent should draw us closer to God. We might pray especially for the grace to live out our baptismal promises more fully. We might pray for the elect who will be baptized at Easter and support their conversion journey by our prayer. We might pray for all those who will celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation during Lent that they will be truly renewed in their baptismal commitment.

Fasting is one of the most ancient practices linked to Lent. The early Church fasted intensely for two days before the celebration of the Easter Vigil. This fast was later extended and became a forty-day period of fasting leading up to Easter. Vatican II called us to renew the observance of the ancient paschal fast: "...let the paschal fast be kept sacred. Let it be celebrated everywhere on Good Friday and, where possible, prolonged throughout Holy Saturday, so that the joys of the Sunday of the Resurrection may be attained with uplifted and clear mind."⁴

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Almsgiving is a sign of our care for those in need and an expression of gratitude for all God has given to us. Works of charity and the promotion of justice are integral elements of the Christian way of life we began when we were baptized.

In Lent, we are asked by the Church to celebrate the sacrament of penance, because Lent is the season for baptismal preparation and renewal. Those who experience the loving mercy of God in the sacrament of reconciliation should find themselves standing alongside the newly baptized at Easter filled with great joy at the new life God has given all of us.

Lent comes to an end before the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday. That liturgy begins the Triduum, the great three days that celebrate the central mystery of our faith.

(Adapted from Rev. Lawrence E. Mick "Lenten Customs: Baptism Is the Key," *Catholic Update*, March 2003.)

Forty Days of Preparation

During the forty days of Lent, we share with the whole Church an annual "wilderness experience." The questions and issues we face are basically the same as those faced by the people of God in both the Old and New Testaments.

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In many languages—for example, Spanish, *Cuaresma*—the name for the season before Easter is derived from the Latin word for *forty*, a clue that something else important is happening. The forty days of Lent recall the forty days of Jesus's being tempted in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13), and Jesus's temptations recall the forty years of Israel's temptation in the wilderness on their journey to the Promised Land—among other Old Testament accounts (see Genesis 7:4, 12, 17; 8:6; Exodus 24:18). In the New Testament, not only is Jesus tempted in the desert for forty days and nights, but his ascension to heaven occurs forty days after the Resurrection (Acts 1:3).

Numbers in the Bible are often not meant to be taken literally, but serve a symbolic function. The number forty denotes a period of preparation for some special action of the Lord; it is a time of grace. After the flood in Genesis, a new creation begins. After Moses converses with God, the covenant is renewed. After Israel's wandering in the wilderness, they will enter into the Promised Land. After Jesus's temptation in the desert, he begins his public ministry; after the ascension, we enter the age of the Church.

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Many spiritual writers speak of a “wilderness experience.” This is a kind of retreat experience, time set apart to focus on, to ask, to consider, to respond to basic questions of the spiritual life. Lent is the Church’s annual “wilderness experience,” its retreat to ask again the basic questions of our faith.

The people of Israel certainly knew the real wilderness, since that would describe fairly well the regions to the south, southwest, and east across the Jordan. The desert is a place of no water and no food since little vegetation can grow there. It is also the abode of dangerous animals. The desert is a place of extremes where choices are more clear-cut.

In the Gospels, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness to be a different kind of Messiah; to take the path of spectacle and power rather than that of humble service, but this temptation would continue throughout his ministry up to his death itself when he is taunted to come down off the cross.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the wilderness symbolizes three main themes:

WEEK ONE: WHAT IS LENT?

A Place of Covenant

The main thing that happened to Israel in the wilderness was their covenant with Yahweh at Mount Sinai, which calls them to a whole different view of reality, a new set of values, and a totally different style of life. To live the covenant truly is to worship this God and to be concerned for the rights and needs of others.

During his temptations in the wilderness, Jesus is tempted to live by a set of values totally different from those of the Father. Will he be the kind of Messiah that God was calling him to be, or would he go the more culturally acceptable way of power, prestige, and spectacle? We know the answer.

During Lent we examine our lives in the light of our sharing in the covenant of Christ. We too are called to a view of reality and a set of values quite different from those of the culture(s) around us. Do we really embody them in our lives?

A Place of Testing

The wilderness was also the place where Israel was tested in its faithfulness to Yahweh and where it repeatedly failed. The wilderness is a place of extremes, and choices are more clear-cut. Food and water are essential for physical survival; security from external threat and internal stability are essential for social survival. These are legitimate needs, but in the wilderness, they become temptations for Israel's faith: Will they maintain their faith in the God who brought them safely from Egypt and who guides them in the wilderness? They often failed.

Jesus, in the wilderness, was also tempted about food, but unlike Israel, he kept his faith in God. What of us? As strongly as we may say that we want—and really intend—to follow God, many forces remain, within and without, to pull us away and push us toward idols. It is always the most legitimate needs (e.g., food, water, defense, internal order) which can become the most seductive idols. Is our service of God the true foundation of our life?

WEEK ONE: WHAT IS LENT?

A Place of Presence

The wilderness was a place of threats to life and of death. The Israelites are tested to see if, in fact, they will truly believe that their God, a God of life, is with them there.

Jesus never wavered in his close relationship to God. We Christians are assured that Jesus indeed is “God with us” (see Matthew 1:23), and he has assured us, “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). In the midst of our struggles, temptations, journeys, do we really believe that God is with us? The wilderness is a place to nurture our belief that God is truly with us.

The Bible bears witness that it is all right not to know the details of the future. We do know the most important thing about it: We are not alone; “God is with us!” The words addressed first to Israel speak to us as well: “Do not be afraid, for I am with you” (see Genesis 28:15; Exodus 3:12). Whatever the future brings, we will make it together; we will persevere even through death itself. Lent, after all, looks forward to Easter!

(Adapted from Michael D. Guinan, O.F.M. “In the Desert with Jesus: Biblical Themes of Lent,” *Catholic Update*, February 2005.)

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion

In his 2005 commencement address at Stanford University, Steve Jobs asked, “If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?” What aspect of your daily life could benefit from a focus this Lent on conversion?

One of the prayers said when ashes are given on Ash Wednesday is “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.” Is there a Gospel practice that you might want to further explore this Lent?

WEEK ONE: WHAT IS LENT?

Inspiration From the Saints

Martin de Porres (1579–1639)

Martin was born in Lima, Peru. Son of a Spanish knight and a black former slave woman, he joined the Dominicans as a lay brother and showed great love for the poor. He mixed a life of deep prayer with service in the kitchen and laundry and with giving alms at the front door. Though Martin's dark skin linked him with a minority class, his own care reached out to all human beings regardless of race or social status. He often cared for slaves brought in from Africa. Martin's example of universal love can serve as a model for our Lenten practice.

Martin de Porres is the patron saint of interracial justice and harmony, and inspires the Church to open the ranks of sainthood to a wider ethnic diversity. How can you reach out to people from other backgrounds this Lent?
