

LENT *and*
EASTER
WISDOM
— *from* —
SAINT VINCENT
DE PAUL

Daily Scripture and Prayers Together
With Saint Vincent de Paul's Own Words

Compiled by John E. Rybolt, CM



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Introduction

Saint Vincent de Paul (1580/81–1660) is commonly called the Saint or even Apostle of Charity. He became a priest at a very young age in search of a comfortable living but gradually abandoned this as he encountered the poor. For him, the poor, especially the most abandoned, were the surest avenue to reach the Lord. From his thirties he dedicated himself to their care.

In art, he is often depicted with children, but his true concentration was evangelization, particularly the poor. He founded two communities to carry on this work, the Congregation of the Mission (called Vincentians or Lazarists), and the Daughters of Charity. For them, he developed a new, even radical, style of life. The sisters were to dress in secular clothing and live an active apostolate. He strove to form the priests and brothers into contemplatives in action, just as he was.

We are fortunate to have much of his correspondence. Also valuable are his talks, or “conferences,” given to both congregations. This book endeavors to present his thoughts in a way that can likewise lead to a deeper relationship with God, a better appreciation of one’s own Christian life, and greater love for all, especially the poor.

The meditative texts used here are taken from conferences to his confreres. Vincent de Paul did not often reflect on Lent or Easter directly, but he was keenly aware of the greater issues of our life in

Christ, whose passion, death, and resurrection are celebrated at this season.

You can use this book in several ways. You might write your ideas or resolutions in a journal, or perhaps in the book on the days indicated. In rereading your notes later, you will find added strength in the inspirations you receive.



A Brief History of Lent

Most Catholics seem to be aware that 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. Is Lent broader than just these practices that seem to be left over from another era?

In the first three centuries of 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 (ca. AD 140–202) 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 AD 325. 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 these 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 known as the Triduum.

Triduum begins with the Mass on Holy Thursday, continues through Good Friday, and concludes with the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. Triduum officially ends 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 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. 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. Therefore, Lent is a movement from one point of view to another or, perhaps, from one interpretation of life to a different one.

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 spiritual 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 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.

The practice of meditation of the Passion of the Lord, his suffering and his death, is also seen as part of the penitential experience of Lent. 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 was imposed on Ash Wednesday and 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’” (Mark 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.

The example of Jesus in the desert for forty days—a time during which he fasted and prayed—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



Whole Burnt Offerings

*A*mong the sacrifices offered to God in the Old Law, holocaust [burnt] was the most excellent one because, in recognition of the sovereignty of God, the victim was burned and consumed entirely on the altars, without saving anything. Everything was reduced to dust and ashes for the glory of God. I think we could call those souls [the martyrs] victims of love—holocausts—since, without holding anything back for themselves, they are consumed and perish because of it.

“REPETITION OF PRAYER,” CONFERENCE 129

BURNT OFFERING

If a person's offering is a burnt offering from the herd, the offering must be a male without blemish. The individual shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to find favor with the LORD, and shall lay a hand on the head of the burnt offering, so that it may be acceptable to make atonement for the one who offers it.

LEVITICUS 1:3–4

PRAYER

Lord God, strengthen me to offer the sacrifices you ask of me in daily life. May I embrace them and offer myself to you as a whole burnt offering. Take away any bitterness that I may experience as I face the demands of life. Give me your joy instead and a sense of your presence.

LENTEN ACTION

At the beginning of this Lent, think about the ashes you receive. Palms and other branches were consumed to produce them, and we receive them today on our foreheads as a sign of inner commitment to the Lord. You might also repeat the action during this season, burning a leaf or piece of paper, and viewing the consuming fire and ash as a reminder of your deepest gift of self to God.

