

Welcome to Lent! But what is Lent anyway? The English word *Lent* comes from the Old English *lencten*. The word refers to springtime, literally to the lengthening of the daylight hours that occurs in the spring. Lent is a *liturgical season* in the annual life of the Church, similar to Advent in many ways, but with a distinct flavor of its own. It's a time of repentance and reflection, an intentional walk with Jesus in the desert as he began his ministry. As the Bible tells us today, he was driven to the desert by the Holy Spirit and he fasted and prayed for 40 days. We know that the number 40 is one of those "meaningful" numbers like 12 and 3 that carry extra spiritual significance, symbolic in their own right. 40 is often used as a shorthand for "a long time," which is especially frustrating for us time-bound 21st century Americans who want a bit more precision. But that's all we're told by Matthew's gospel – Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, and afterwards (in case we missed the point) we are told that "he was hungry".

Since the early days of the Church, the desire to accompany Jesus in the desert has captured the imagination of many holy men and women. This practice became known as the *Lenten Fast*. Gradually, the Church began to require the practice of a 40-day fast for all those adults who desired to join the Church through the initiation sacraments at Easter Vigil. By the 9th century, this practice became a requirement for all the faithful. Now here's where we need to make an important distinction between *Lent* and the *Lenten Fast*. Lent is a liturgical season; the Lenten Fast is a practice. Why does this matter? The number 40.

Now, even though the term "forty" biblically means "a long time," in the eyes of the early Church, it was taken quite literally. If you add the number of days between Ash Wednesday and Holy Saturday, you get precisely 46. It's easy to see that this year, with Ash Wednesday on March 1 and Holy Saturday on April 15. And yes, 46 is not the same as 40, so what's going on? The Lenten Fast (not Lent the season) must be 40 days long, and it has never included Sundays. There are six Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Holy Saturday, so once you subtract those, you have your precise 40 days of Lenten Fasting accounted for.

40 Days of Lenten Fast

Sunday	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			March 1 st Ash Wed	2	3	4
1 st Sunday	6	7	8	9	10	11
2 nd Sunday	13	14	15	16	17	18
3 rd Sunday	20	21	22	23	24	25
4 th Sunday	27	28	29	30	31	Apr 1
5 th Sunday	3	4	5	6	7	8
Palm Sunday	10	11	12	Holy Thursday	Good Friday	Holy Saturday
Easter Sunday						

Now it gets confusing. In 1956, the Church fathers decided to emphasize Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday as one continuous celebration called the Triduum, Latin for 3 days. And, since Holy Saturday counts as Easter Sunday Vigil, it makes logical sense that the season of Lent must end once we get to the Triduum. And so it was decreed. Lent, the liturgical season, ends when the Holy Thursday evening liturgy begins. But, the Lenten *Fast* continues right through to Holy Saturday, maintaining the original 40 day duration. So, to summarize, Lent the *season* goes from Ash Wednesday to Holy Thursday, every day included. The Lenten Fast goes from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, excluding all Sundays. Whew! Did you get all that?

The Lenten Season

Sunday	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			March 1 st Ash Wed	2	3	4
1 st Sunday	6	7	8	9	10	11
2 nd Sunday	13	14	15	16	17	18
3 rd Sunday	20	21	22	23	24	25
4 th Sunday	27	28	29	30	31	Apr 1
5 th Sunday	3	4	5	6	7	8
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Easter Sunday						

So, when you talk about “giving something up for Lent,” you are tapping into the long Church tradition of the Lenten Fast, accompanying Jesus for 40 days and 40 nights. You take the full 40 days right up to the day before Easter to do this, but you are allowed a break on each Sunday, because every Sunday is a resurrection day, a day of joy and rest. No grumbling on Sundays! I imagine you’ve already been asked today, “What are you giving up for Lent?” Many of us have our ready answer – dessert or chocolate or alcohol – something fairly straightforward, but not too difficult. You know how it goes – Lent is designed to help you lose the weight you gained during Advent and Christmas! But I wonder if we are truly tapping into the meaning of the Lenten Fast. Jesus empties himself in the desert – after 40 days he was hungry! A good fast should leave us hungry, empty, ready for something new to be filled in. It doesn’t need to be food! In fact, I challenge you to consider a Lenten Fast that has nothing to do with food. Here’s some ideas:

1. Give up watching television from Monday through Saturday. Yes, you can watch on Sunday if you must. But the point is, it should hurt a bit. It should make you stop and think. One thing to think is *now what do I do?* Read a good spiritual book or two. Talk to your family – what a concept! Take walks – the weather is getting warmer. Forge some new habits.

2. Give up non-essential shopping. Shop for food as you always do, but no browsing for stuff at the stores or on the Internet. Buy only what you consume or absolutely need to replace. This is really tough, especially for the ladies it seems. But what a great statement against materialism!
3. Guys, give up the sports page during the week. Or whatever stands in for the sports page in your life – maybe a favorite web site or ESPN.com. Consider how much time you waste absorbed in sports news. Is it out of hand? You won't know until you stop doing it and begin to miss it.
4. Turn off your smart phone at 6 PM every day and leave it off until the next morning. You'll be amazed at how quickly you learn to live without it. Tell people you're not available from 6 to 6. Watch the panic grow in their eyes. Gee whiz, what did people do before smart phones? You're about to find out.
5. And if none of these things are resonating with you, here's one we can all agree on. Fast from anger, fast from lust, fast from envy, gluttony, and laziness. Fast from greed, fast from pride. Don't go around telling everyone about it. Just do it. You'll know it's working if someone says to you, "Why are you so nice these days?" Fasting from these deadly sins is lifelong, with no Sunday breaks allowed. If that seems hard, start with the simple items I mentioned earlier.

Whatever you do, make this Lenten Fast meaningful and a bit life-changing. Get in touch with the excess in your life and end the Fast hungry and empty. Hopefully, the better practices you began in Lent to replace those missing elements from fasting will persist. They say that good habits take about six weeks to settle in. *Intentionally* creating room in your crowded life for Christ is what Lent is about. You can do it!