

HOW WILL I PREPARE FOR LENT THIS YEAR?



BEGIN WITH YOURSELF

Even before Ash Wednesday, lay our plans for renewal by beginning with a better understanding of yourself. Choose a day and a place where you can put yourself in God's presence – a quiet room at home, a beautiful setting outside, or perhaps before the Blessed Sacrament at church.

First, quiet your spirit. Breathe deeply. Become aware of God's love. Humbly ask for enlightenment. Then begin the assessments below. Consider the areas one by one, thinking back over the past year.

WHERE AM I THIS YEAR?

Your Health – On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your health? Write it down – make whatever notes you feel about concerns you have or gratitude you feel about your health.

Your family and friends – On the same scale, how would you sum up relationships with your immediate and extended family this past year? How comfortable are you about your friendships? Make notes as you feel called about these joys and sorrows.

God – How would you assess your relationship with God at this time? In what ways do you feel intimacy? Distance? Confusion? Note what has strengthened or weakened your bond this year.

Your parish – How would you rate your relationship with your community of believers? Do you worship, socialize, serve with them? Make some notes about your satisfactions and challenges.

Mission - You belong to a global community. How would you rate your concern for the earth and all its peoples? How have you contributed to your neighborhood? Do you communicate with local leaders? Are you registered to vote? How have your faith and your actions made the world a better place this year?

Your work – Whether you are employed, homemaking, studying, retired or unemployed, how would you rate your satisfaction with your work?

Your finances – How do you rate your financial stability? In the past year, what causes have you had for thanksgiving or anxiety? Have you given to the needy and to those working for justice? Do you have a current will?

Your education – Whether or not you are in school, you continue to learn by experience and development. How would you rate your educational progress this past year? Did it include religious education? What have you read? What stands out?

The environment – Are you conscious of the ways you, your household and your community contribute to the care or the abuse of the earth's resources? What have you learned lately about these issues? What resources – conserving habits does your household practice? Recycling, turning off unneeded lights, other?

Your overall happiness – How would you rate your overall happiness? What are its principal sources and threats?

A Blank box – Is there something else going on right now that these categories did not include? What is it? How would you rate your satisfaction with it? What notes do you want to make?

When you complete your assessments, read back over them and make sure they reflect who you are. Do they include the significant events, emotions, desires and accomplishments of the past year? Do they affirm you? Do they challenge you as well?

Before leaving your quiet place, thank God for your life. Ask God's forgiveness for your shortcomings. Thank God for the Spirit who has sustained you this past year and aided your meditations this day. Seek peace.

RENEWAL

The next thing is to make some plans for renewal this Lent. The decisions you make will build on your reawakened knowledge of yourself. They will help you shape a Lent that will fit your needs.

You may continue with this exercise immediately after you finish the previous one, but it may be better to take a break between these sessions so that you can enter into the next phase with a fresh spirit.

You will need a Bible.

Choose a quiet place and allow yourself plenty of time to complete the exercise. Calm your spirit, ask for God's help and begin.

First, open your Bible to the Gospel passage Matthew 6:1-18 and read the words. We hear this text every year on Ash Wednesday. Drawn from the Sermon on the Mount, it presents Jesus' practical advice about the spiritual life. He expects his followers to engage in three spiritual practices. These are prayer, fasting, and works of charity and justice (often called almsgiving). Jesus wants us to be sincere in all three.

Then, as you plan your Lenten renewal, concentrate on all three practices. They support one another. Praying will strengthen you for fasting and deepen your charity. Fasting will soften your heart for charity and quiet your spirit for prayer. Performing works of charity will give your fasting purpose and concentrate your prayer.

Review your assessments just before you start the next step. Then, as you go through the following sections, write down some ideas prayer, fasting and almsgiving. What you write will suggest some activities for this Lent.

PRAYER

Sunday Eucharist – The celebration of Sunday Eucharist is the heart of the entire spiritual life. It supports everything else. If your commitment to participating in the Sunday Eucharist is at all weak, a resolution to strengthen it belongs at the top of your list.

Daily prayer – The more we knock, the more the door of our awareness opens. How will you commit to daily prayer? What times of the day will work best for you? Mornings? Evenings? Do you have a special place for prayer? Some people designate a room for the purpose and furnish it in a way that invites prayer, including a Bible, prayer books, a chair or bench, a candle, and perhaps some sacred images, incense or plants. Does your household pray together? Mealtimes and special events, as well as mornings and evenings – all are occasions when you might try gathering for prayer. Is your family comfortable with different forms of prayer? Lent is a good time to cherish the old and learn something new: reading a Scripture passage slowly and prayerfully, meditative singing or chanting, the rosary, litanies, praying spontaneously, or sitting together in deep, rich silence. What reasonable goal could you and your household set this Lent?

Preparing for Sunday Mass – Do you prepare yourself for the Sunday liturgy each week? Do you read the Scriptures beforehand so you can listen to them more attentively? Do you arrive at church early and stay for the end? Do you meet with friends to talk about this week's Scripture or about last week's homily? Do you meditate during the week, perhaps before the Blessed Sacrament?

Reading – Saint Benedict saw reading as a prayerful activity and required each of his monks to read a book during Lent. Whether you try scripture, biographies of saintly people, church teachings or something about the spiritual life, reading can deepen your prayer.

Pilgrimage – Could you make a pilgrimage to a holy place to ritualize your spiritual journey? Is there a religious shrine or place of pilgrimage nearby? Could you visit a place holy to you – your birthplace, a former neighborhood, a place of natural beauty, the cemetery where loved ones are buried or the church where you were baptized? Could you walk the Stations of the Cross as part of your Lent this year, to follow the footsteps of Jesus?

As you reflect on these opportunities for prayer, consider those that might help you face some of the challenges that came to light from your assessments. You cannot carry out every idea. Which ones would help you the most this year? How might you open your ears in a new way to hear the voice of God?

FASTING

Fasting means consuming less – or sometimes nothing. Abstinence means avoiding a certain kind of thing – such as meat or television. Both practices are hallmarks of Lent and they may be applied to a wide variety of things. Fasting and abstinence discipline the body to rely less on the things of this world. They create within us a clear-headed dependence on God, whose love fulfills our every need.

Sometimes we fast from what is essentially good. We do so in a spirit of penance or to demonstrate our preference for the higher good of an unencumbered relationship with God. Other times we abstain from habits that hinder us – excesses we know we should trim, but struggle to do so. Both practices remove the distractions that keep us from the presence of God. During Lent we observe fast and abstinence to deepen our prayer and to open our hearts for charity.

Food – Fasting from food affects the body and shapes the human spirit. Here are the minimum expectations for most adult Catholics: On Ash Wednesday we are to fast by eating only one full meal and nothing between meals. On Ash Wednesday and all the Fridays of Lent we are to abstain from meat. These practices bind Catholics in a common but very small effort. (After Lent ends we observe the Paschal fast on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, to prepare ourselves for Easter.)

If you are able, you may fast and abstain beyond that minimum. Jesus and Moses and Elijah fasted for forty days. Make some good decisions about what you will eat and drink, and when you will eat and drink for the next forty days.

What to eat and drink – Think of how to take good care of your body, a temple of the Holy Spirit. What do you eat and drinks that you should abstain from? What has your doctor told you to eat more of and what less of? Is it time to lock the liquor cabinet, clip shut the bags of chips, take closed the chocolates, purge the freezer of frozen treats? What choices can you make in solidarity with the poor? Eat less meat, less fish, less seafood. Choose grains and vegetables in place of animal foods to make the world more just. Prepare the simple foods yourself. Learnt to love these gifts of the earth and work of human hands. Make a delicious meatless soup every week, or a wonderful vegetable salad. Take time to marvel at earth's goodness.

When to eat and drink – Can you save your appetite for the times when the household can sit down together? Can you omit a meal or two each week? A little hunger will place you in solidarity with the poor of this world.

Fasting and abstaining will put you in touch with your body and its cravings, help you identify with the poor and hungry, strengthen your resolve, clear your thinking and make you more attentive to prayer and more thoughtful of others. If you share resolutions with your friends, you will discover the power of community in observing a Lenten fast.

Exercise – Condition your body as you condition your soul. Including exercise as part of your Lenten regimen will enhance the effects of your Lenten diet. You'll find that you have more energy for prayer and service to others. Work out a plan with your friends and you'll have extra reasons to be faithful to your commitments.

Distractions and entertainments – If you give time this Lent to reading, to prayer, and to good works, where will the time come from? Do you need to fast from time spent in front of screens? Television screens especially, but also computer screens. Television and the internet can make genuine contributions to life, but they often serve our craving for distraction. Try setting them aside for a while and fill your life with more natural delights.

Other behaviors – Is this the time to fast from nicotine, alcohol, gambling, pornography? Are you behaving in some ways that do not conform to the moral standards of your faith? Are you unconsciously wasting resources? Are you neglecting something or someone in the crush of busyness? Besides food, how else should you fast and abstain this Lent to meet the challenge of your assessments?

ALMSGIVING

God has given you all that you have – your life, your love, your abilities and resources. Count your blessings. Name the gifts you have received from your Maker.

Now recall the story of the widow's mite. Jesus, sitting by the Temple treasury one day, observed the people, rich and poor, making their offerings. A poor widow put in a small amount, yet Jesus singled her out as the example for his followers. She gave all she had.

Imagine Jesus as the usher in your church. Imagine Jesus combing the list of volunteers at your parish. Is he singling you out as an example for others? Do you give a little because it will help the needy for a while? Or do you give a lot because what God has given must be shared?

Time – We generally think of almsgiving as a financial contribution. But we can give our time and talent as well as our treasure. How might you give your time this season as a sign of your charity? Can you visit the sick? Can you pick up trash on your street, at the church or in public areas? Could you meet someone new at church each week? Could you send a complimentary letter to a friend? Are you someone's godparent? How might you spend quality spiritual time with your godchildren this season? Are you participating in the parish social events? Do you attend neighborhood meetings? Do you contact those in charge and make your conscience felt on behalf of the needy in your area and around the world? What can you do with your time that will give alms this Lent?

Talent – With what skills has God endowed you? Do you put them at the service of others, not for pay but as gift? Are your talents at work in your home, your neighborhood, your civic community? Are they making a difference for the world? How could you use your talents this Lent?

Treasure – How do you share your treasure. The Bible recommends tithing, a contribution of ten percent to charity. What would ten percent of your gross income be? How close are you? Could you live on less if it meant you could feed a hungry neighbor? Who benefits from your generosity? Are you a generous or a stingy tipper? What other donations could you make to charity? Can you forgive someone's debt to you? You are merely a steward of the treasure God has entrusted to you.

As you reflect upon these opportunities for almsgiving, which of them will help you as a Christian and support your other practices this Lent?

LENTEN RESOLUTIONS AND STRATEGIES

By now you should have quite a few ideas about how you might spend this Lent. It is time now to decide which you wish to accept for the season of renewal this year – what you want to add and what you want to subtract. Remember, you only have six weeks. Choose resolutions that you can accomplish and sustain. But make them challenging.

Follow your resolutions the entire six weeks. Or work into them gradually: start with a modified version of your idea the first week and reach your goal in the weeks ahead. Sharing your decisions with a trusted friend or advisor gives you a witness and supporter.

Even in the midst of Lent, Sundays are still celebrations of the Lord's day of resurrection. For this reason, many people relax their Lenten observances on Sundays. Others prefer to maintain their discipline throughout the six weeks so the entire season stands as a whole. It is your choice.

Some people choose activities simply because they are hard. Such choices will help build disciplines, and if that is a personal goal it certainly has merit. But your Lenten journey can also enhance other aspects of life. You can shape it to fit your spiritual needs and desires. Review your assessments. What resolutions will address the insights you have gained? Let Lent challenge you and fill you with delight.

The disciplines of Lent form individuals – but also the community. As you make your resolutions, Christians throughout the world will join you. Their pledges will lighten your journey. When you re-evaluate yourself next year, you will see how, with God's help, you have made the world a better place. You will have kept Lent.

Now, mindful of the person you are, and of the person you would like to be, trusting that you are the child of a God who loves you as you are and empowers you to be more, write the resolutions you will make for Lent this year.

THIS LENT I RESOLVE...

TO PRAY...

TO FAST...

TO GIVE ALMS...