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Living Lent

History: Lent has been part of the Church's life for at least the past 1700 years. It began as a period of special preparation for adults being baptized during the Easter vigil. Gradually it became a period of penance and conversion for public sinners and also for devout members of the community.

Purpose of Lent today: Lent is a time of prayer and penance, when Christ wants to lead us back to our baptismal promises of dying to sin and of living for God. We prepare ourselves to enter once again into Jesus' Paschal mystery and to renew it in our lives.

- *Dying to sin.* During Lent, God's people seek to put sin out of their lives by uprooting habits and tendencies that are contrary to God's will. It is a time of conversion, of turning away from our sins and of turning back to God.

- *Living for God.* The Lord Jesus is calling us to be people of praise and prayer, and living signs of his love for all. During Lent, we open our hearts to our Father, so that we may live with Christ for God.

The elect: The catechumens who will be baptised at the Easter vigil take a prominent place in the Lenten Sunday liturgies and at celebrations during the week. We join in prayer for them and, through our participation in the various rituals (for example, the scrutinies) come to a better understanding of the grace of our own initiation.

Lenten works: What should we be doing for Lent? Today the Church invites us to prepare for Easter by doing individual penance and penance as a group; by reading God's word more carefully; by praying more ardently, including sincere prayer for sinners; by giving of ourselves to the service of God's people.

All weekdays in Lent are days of special penance. We are obliged to join the Church around the world in fast and abstinence on Ash Wednesday and on Good Friday. On Good Friday and Holy Saturday we keep the solemn Paschal fast.

Ten forms of penance: These are "the top ten" in the tradition of the Christian people. They are our daily responsibility as believers; in Lent, we concentrate on them even more seriously.

1. *Giving up sin.* Jesus tells us that we show our love for him by keeping his commandments, especially by loving others as he has loved us. We are called to live blameless lives as God's holy people, the Church. Our God wants us to turn away from our sins, our failings, our laziness in prayer, our unwillingness to do better.

2. *Praying.* Jesus and his apostles tell us to pray always, to be constant in prayer. Traditional times for Christians to pray are morning, evening and mealtimes. Personal prayer is a necessary preparation for our sharing in the Church's public worship, the liturgy. In our love, we join Jesus and all God's people in praying for ourselves, for our family and friends, for our leaders, for those who suffer, and for the Church and the world.

3. *Fasting.* Fasting means cutting down on the amount and richness of our food and drink. Done as a penance for sin, it helps us to pray better: an empty stomach can lead to more attentive prayer. The money we save on food should be given to others in alms. The law of fasting obliges adults until they are 60 years old.

4. *Doing good works.* Jesus went about doing good. The apostles continued to teach us to do good works, to help those in need, to give others the good example of our living, to pray for other people and to be ready to serve them in their time of need. The list is endless, but can be summarized in a few words: we are to help Jesus and come to his aid by helping other people in a spirit of love.

5. *Giving alms.* We give alms to help God's poor and to support the good works of the Church and other positive agencies. Again our help is being given to Christ in his brothers and sisters. Many Churches encourage giving 10%—the biblical tithe—as the minimum gift to God and to God's works. We do not give in order to show off or keep up with others; instead we give cheerfully to God, who has given us everything we have.

6. *Abstinence.* This form of penance needs to be seen as a near cousin of fasting. We may give up meat or other desirable foods on one or two days a week during Lent, especially on Friday, the day of Christ's saving death on the cross. Our abstinence is another way of sharing in Christ's work of saving the world.

Throughout the year, every Friday is a day of abstinence from meat, obliging all Catholics who are 14 years or older.

We may also substitute other good actions for abstinence from meat. These could include special acts of charity (visiting the sick or aged, helping those in any need, contributing time or money to a work of charity) or other acts of piety (taking part in a service of worship with others, praying with our family, spending some extra time in personal prayer, especially with God's holy word in the scriptures).

7. *Carrying out our duties of life.* This is perhaps the hardest and most unrecognized form of penance. We serve God by living out our vocation in love each day. We do our best for God by being a good mother, father, teacher, worker, student, religious, minister, priest. God is calling each of us to be a living sacrifice, and to offer our daily life through Christ.

8. *Meditative reading.* In an age of constant bombardment by noise and sights, Christians need time to read and reflect. Believers have to nourish their faith by reading. Prayerful reading of God's word each day opens our hearts to the Spirit, and lets God's thoughts and ways influence ours. Reading other Christian books and magazines will help us to be stronger in our faith and in our living.

9. *Controlling our desire for possessions.* Jesus reminds us that our heart will be wherever our treasure is. He tells us to build up treasures in heaven rather than on earth. Today's

consumer is constantly tempted to buy more and more things: everything has to be newer, bigger, better—and automatic. As Christians, we should be cutting down on our possessions, eliminating frills, giving our surplus to others, lessening our wants, and sharing ourselves, our time, our talents and our possessions with others.

10. *Controlling our desire for entertainment.* Too much entertainment—by radio, TV, movies, spectator sports, light reading, distractions—can dull our taste for the things of God, and lead us to have no time for the works of the Lord.

Christians need to be a sign of contradiction to the world, and to spend more time in serving God and people.

Lent in Our Home

Examine your conscience: At the beginning of Lent, discuss each of the ten penance suggestions with your family. How can you improve your present way of life?

Your resolution: Make a serious resolution to do several actions of penance, both individually and as a family, each day during this Lent.

Rewards of a good Lent: The Lord Jesus rewards those who are generous in his service. A good Lent is a sharing in his cross, and leads us to renew our baptismal promises at the Easter vigil.

Paschal fast: Make a particular effort to keep the days of the Triduum, and especially Good Friday and Holy Saturday, as a period of prayer and reflection.

*All praise to you, Father in heaven,
for leading us out of the darkness of sin
into the light of your kingdom.*

*We bless you for sending us your Son
to save us,
to die for us that we might die to sin,
to be raised that we might share your life.
We thank you for giving us your Spirit of love,
to live in our hearts and lead us to you.
All glory, praise and honour be yours,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
now and evermore. Amen.*

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