

An invitation to a fruitful stewardship

The start of every new season is exciting and full of possibilities. Think of how happy people are when they see the first signs of spring, or, when the first day of school arrives, or, for baseball fans, the excitement they feel on the day of the season opener.

The same could be said of the seasons of the Church, and especially the season of Lent which begins on Ash Wednesday (March 6 this year).

With ashes on our foreheads, we express our eagerness to embark on the Lenten “disciplines” — to pray often, to go to Mass often, to go to confession, to do the Stations of the Cross, to fast and to give alms.

However, it is important that we understand the spiritual significance of any discipline and to do it with a right attitude.

The season of Lent is described as the “acceptable time” and “the day of salvation” — a time of spiritual renewal to return to the Lord.

As we begin the journey of Lent, here are a couple of questions to help bring focus to our Lenten “discipline.” What is the reason behind the Lenten “discipline” we plan to undertake? How do we see Christ in the plan?

In order to focus on the spiritual significance of Lent, the season itself is shaped around the imagery of Christ’s 40 days of fasting and contemplation in the desert, a test of body and spirit. In fact, the Scripture readings for the liturgy on Ash Wednesday point to the penitential nature of Lent.

When we hear Prophet Joel calling us to return to the Lord with all our heart “with fasting, with weeping and with mourning” we are reminded of our failures to live as children of God. When we hear Jesus giving us instructions on how to pray, fast and give alms, He is reminding us of our call to live as faithful disciples. If we take these readings to heart, they help us enter into Lent with humility, gratitude and graciousness.

As baptized people, we are called to live with Christ at the centre of our lives. Our spiritual renewal at any time in the Church



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year should focus on our way of life as faithful disciples and grateful stewards. That is particularly important during the season of Lent in light of the suffering, passion and death of Jesus.

We can use Lent as a period to reflect on the many ways to witness to the Lord by living out our baptismal promises to bear fruit as stewards. If we keep the context of our call to stewardship and discipleship in mind, the spiritual meaning of Lent becomes clear.

What we do in Lent helps us to reflect and meditate on the meaning of Christ’s suffering and death in our lives. In Lent we orient our days around the suffering Christ. Our various Lenten “disciplines” may help us to learn to follow in the footsteps of Jesus who for His great love for us “emptied Himself... and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8).

The popular discipline of Lent — giving up something for the sake of others — is deeply rooted in stewardship if we do it with “a renewed spirit and a contrite heart.” According to Pope Francis in his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), “we incarnate the duty of hearing the cry of the poor when we are deeply moved by the suffering of others” (193).

When we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, our journey with Christ will help us experience the mercy and compassion of our Lord. That makes the Lenten journey well worth our efforts, leaving us well prepared to celebrate the glorious feast of Easter.

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Lenten



Here are some things to know — or at least be aware of for trivia contests — about the Lenten season, which begins March 6 with Ash Wednesday and lasts until Holy Thursday, April 18:

Ash Wednesday is not a holy day of obligation, though it is a day of prayer, abstinence, fasting and repentance. Abstinence means refraining from eating meat; fish is OK. Fasting means reducing one’s intake of food, like eating two small meals that together would not equal one full meal.



The day before **Ash Wednesday** is called **Fat Tuesday, Shrove Tuesday** or sometimes **Pancake Tuesday**. Traditionally it is when the faithful feast in preparation for time of fasting, abstinence, confession and penance.

The ashes used for **Ash Wednesday** are made from the burned and blessed palms of the previous year’s Palm Sunday. The palms are burned in a metal vessel and then ground into a powder.



The ashes serve two purposes:

1. to remind us that we will return to the dust from which God made us; and
2. ashes represent the admission that we are all sinners and a plea for God’s pardon.

In the Table of Liturgical Days, which ranks the different liturgical celebrations and seasons, **Ash Wednesday** ties for second in ranking — along with Christmas, Epiphany, Ascension, Pentecost, Sundays of Advent, Lent and Easter, and a few others. **Top ranked in the table are the Paschal Triduum — the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil — along with Easter Sunday.**



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Source: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic News Service, Catholic Online.

There are hymns that speak to the length of the season — one of them is “**Lord, Who Throughout These 40 Days**” — but the span between March 6 and April 18 — this year’s Lenten period — is 44 days. That’s because the Sundays of Lent are not prescribed days of fast and abstinence.

Fasting during **Lent** followed the example of Jesus’ 40-day fast in the wilderness. It also recalled the 40 days that Moses fasted on Sinai and the 40 days that Elijah fasted on his journey to Mount Horeb



The word “*alleluia*” is conspicuously absent during Mass, not only at the Gospel Acclamation but from any use including hymns. The Glory to God is omitted. The term of joy returns on Easter.

During **Lent**, the priest will wear violet vestments, indicating the time of penance. The exceptions is red vestments, the colour of mourning, for Palm Sunday. Red is also worn on Good Friday, followed by white for Easter.



In keeping with the starkness of the season, decoration in the church is at a minimum. Flowers are forbidden in the altar area and in some churches the cross and statues are covered for the last two weeks of **Lent**.

