OUT OF THE ASHES

A Lenten Companion

Catholic Answers
TO EXPLAIN & DEFEND THE FAITH

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Ready or Not, It's Lent

Michelle Arnold

The other day I was visiting with some friends at a party. One of them, a Catholic, mentioned that she and her husband had recently embarked on a cleansing diet, and had good results. Then she remarked, "It's amazing how much easier it is to avoid certain foods when you are not doing it for spiritual reasons."

Lent is here, that penitential season on the liturgical calendar when Catholics give up all sorts of things for spiritual reasons. And it is again that time of year when the questions start pouring into Catholic Answers' apologetics department about how Catholics should observe Lent. The unspoken problem at the root of many of the concerns often seems to be a need to know how quickly the Lenten penances can be chucked. Here are a few examples:

> Can I have what I gave up for Lent on the Sundays of Lent?
> When does Lent end?
> Do alligators and muskrats count as meat?
> What about eggs, cheese, and bacon bits? Do I have to give up those as well on days of abstinence?

(*Nota bene*: It is not the purpose of this blog post to answer these apologetics questions. If you are interested in researching on your own for the answers, start here.)

I sympathize with this annual Catholic dilemma over how to observe Lent because it reminds me of my very first Lent as a Catholic over fifteen years ago. With no experience in how to create a plan for Lent, I went seriously overboard. If I remember correctly—and

it is an experience I prefer to forget—I plotted out a complicated ritual of daily prayer, spiritual reading, and personal devotions. If that was not enough, I resolved to give up caffeine for Lent. Not just chocolate, or tea, or soda, or coffee, mind you, but all caffeine. By Easter I was spiritually burnt-out, a nervous wreck, and in no mood to celebrate our Lord's Resurrection. All I wanted to do that Easter was mainline caffeine until Pentecost.

One lasting effect of my first Lent is that I have taken a *laissez-faire*attitude toward Lent ever since. Each Lent I have done the bare minimum required by the Church and not one bit more.

That is not a plan of action I recommend to you this Lent. Rather I recommend looking at Lent as a spiritual marathon and, as with any marathon, building up over the years to more stringent observances of Lent. I also recommend that the highest level of observances be done only while working with a confessor or spiritual director. So, let's review the levels at which you can observe Lent.

The Spiritual Couch Potato

At this level, you do what the Church requires and not one bit more. What does the Church require of you during Lent? The Church requires that you observe the days of fast and abstinence. Catholics in the Latin church fast and abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. They abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent. Consult this overview of the Lenten fast and abstinence requirements from the USCCB. (If you are an Eastern Catholic, consult with your pastor for the fast and abstinence disciplines of the Eastern Catholic churches.)

If you have not been to confession in a while, you should review whether you have committed any mortal sins because mortal sins must be confessed at least once per year. (It would be better to confess mortal sins as soon as possible after you commit them, but start somewhere.) You may wish to obtain an examination of conscience to help you prepare for confession. Helpful hints for confession can be found in this blog post I wrote last year. Sacramental confession will ensure that you can receive Communion during the Easter season (CCC 2042), as the Church expects. If you need some motivation to get yourself off the couch and into the confessional box, go watch this video and then get thee to confession.

Contrary to Catholic urban legend, Catholics are not *required* by the Church to sacrifice personal pleasures during Lent. To do so is praiseworthy and can be meritorious, but it is strictly voluntary (and because it is voluntary such Lenten sacrifices can be set aside at will). But if you want to explore your options for doing more this Lent, the USCCB has posted a collection of Lenten resources appropriate for Catholics at all levels of observance.

When you have mastered this level, it may be time to consider moving on to the next.

The Spiritual Jogger

Many people live at this level of Lenten observance for most of their lives, perhaps with a few catnaps on the couch now and again. And that is okay. It may not be the ideal, but it is far better to spiritually jog through Lent and rest when you need to than to risk a spiritual crack-up that has you contemplating giving up Lent for Lent.

At this level, you do all that you did while on the couch, but you begin to add in new observances here and there.

You might choose to give up a personal pleasure for Lent, perhaps either a comfort food (e.g., chocolate) or a time-wasting activity (e.g., television, social media). Just be careful not to give up anything that could turn you into a cross for others to bear during Lent.

For example, Dorothy Day was once asked by her confessor to not give up smoking for Lent. Every Lent she became so difficult to live with while off her cigarettes that her community started praying for Day to smoke during Lent. Her confessor suggested to Day that she instead pray for the grace to give up cigarettes. So, every morning Day prayed to be able to stop smoking. One morning, after years of praying, she reached for her pack and realized she no longer wanted to smoke. She never smoked again.

If you find yourself searching for loopholes that will allow you to give up your Lenten self-denial (e.g., wanting a "break" from your Lenten penances on Sundays), you might take that as an indicator that you have taken on too much for Lent.

You could also add in extra liturgical celebrations. Perhaps you might attend a public recitation of the stations of the cross at your parish. Or you might check to see if there will be a Tenebrae service offered this Holy Week in your area. Many churches add an evening Mass on weekdays to their Lenten schedule to make it easier for laypeople to attend a daily Mass during Lent. Your diocese will host a Chrism Mass during which the sacred oils are consecrated by the bishop for use throughout the diocese in the coming year. If there is an adoration chapel nearby, benediction might be offered during Lent (and you can also pop in for a visit with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament).

You could also try to fit in some spiritual reading or film viewing. As with any worthwhile activity, it is possible to overdo here, but one book and one film during Lent should be a reasonable goal for most people. Here are a few Lenten book and film suggestions:

Books

- *To Know Christ Jesus* by Frank Sheed
- *Jesus of Nazareth* by Benedict XVI
- *Life of Christ* by Bishop Fulton Sheen

Films

- *Of Gods and Men*
- *Les Misérables* (2012)
- *The Mission*

A couple of years ago, one of my co-workers sponsored a candidate for confirmation at the Easter Vigil who decided to spend the Lent before her confirmation doing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Rather than take on all of the works of mercy in one Lent, as this confirmand did, perhaps you might choose one corporal and one spiritual work of mercy. One possibility might be to participate in a 40 Days for Life campaign in your area. This year, the spring campaign begins today on Ash Wednesday and ends on April 13.

Suppose you are yawning right now, and wanting to say, "Michelle, I do all this already, and perfectly well. I keep the commandments, and am ready to take a shot at being perfect" (cf. Matt. 19:16–22).

The Spiritual Marathon Runner

At this point, you need a spiritual trainer. If you cannot find a spiritual director, you at least need a confessor to whom you confess on a regular basis (preferably often enough that you feel comfortable with him and trust his spiritual advice). Do not move up to this level without one.

Consider the suggestions that follow to be ideas to propose to your confessor. If he gives you the okay, you are good to go. If your confessor advises a different spiritual regimen, far greater weight should be given to his advice than to a blog post on the Internet. In the end it does not matter what you *want* to do; it matters what you and your confessor determine together is within your spiritual capabilities. As St. Alphonsus Liguori, who was a master spiritual director and a moral theologian, once said:

> I tell you that you should implicitly trust in obedience your confessor. This advice is given by all of the Doctors of the Church and the holy Fathers as well. In short, obedience to your confessor is the safest remedy which Jesus Christ left us for quieting the doubts of conscience, and we should give thanks for it.

At this level, you do all that you did at the previous two levels, and then you might take on bigger challenges. If your health permits it (check with your doctor), you could set aside a day to subsist on bread and water. Or—again, health permitting—you could refrain from eating between meals. Or you could eat your meals without the extra garnishes, such as condiments, that make your food tastier. If you want to get creative with your Lenten fasting, here are 5 Creative Fasting Ideas. (Again, I emphasize, and I wish this blogger had emphasized it, that you need the input and approval of a regular confessor or spiritual director before you take up extreme or "creative" fasts.)

If your finances permit it, you could raise your level of almsgiving. You might combine extra fasting with almsgiving by donating the money you save when you fast to hunger-relief projects such as CRS Rice Bowl, an annual Lenten almsgiving project sponsored by Catholic Relief Services. Remember that almsgiving need not be limited to cash.

While you are doing your spring housecleaning, you could look for items that can be donated to your local crisis pregnancy center, women's shelter, or children's hospital.

This may be the level at which you could take up daily devotional observances. (Yes, any daily spiritual regimen is best undertaken after consultation with a confessor or spiritual director.) Start with a daily rosary or Divine Mercy chaplet; perhaps build up to learning the Liturgy of the Hours. See if you can make daily Mass a habit rather than an occasional field trip.

Quo Vadis?

I once overheard a conversation between a rabbi and a recent convert to Judaism. The rabbi asked the new Jew if she had celebrated Purim that year. The convert sheepishly said she had not. The rabbi did not scold her but merely said, "Maybe next year."

That may be a helpful attitude with which to approach Lent. You might not able to meet all the high hopes you had for Lent on Shrove Tuesday. Perhaps in previous years you have stumbled and fallen short of the finish line in your spiritual marathon. Or, like me, perhaps you have stood on the sidelines and offered water bottles and towels to others in the race. Just because you have not met your goals for Lent does not mean that you are a failure as a Catholic or should give up. Keep telling yourself whenever you need to, "Maybe next year."

Where am I with Lent this year? Well, I recently gave up soda, thinking it would be easier to do so a few weeks early as a running start at Lent. And I have given myself some ideas in this blog post for getting off the spiritual couch and taking a jog this Lent. I am nowhere near being ready for a spiritual marathon though.

Maybe next year.

Lent Is Old English for Spring

Jimmy Akin

What is Lent?

According to the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, "Lent is a preparation for the celebration of Easter. For the Lenten liturgy disposes both catechumens and the faithful to celebrate the paschal mystery: catechumens, through the several stages of Christian initiation; the faithful through reminders of their own baptism and through penitential practices" (*General Norms* 27).

Is Lent actually forty days long?

Technically, no. According to the *General Norms*, "Lent runs from Ash Wednesday until the Mass of the Lord's Supper, exclusive" (*General Norms* 28). This means Lent ends at the beginning of the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday. Count it as you will, that's more than forty days. Therefore, the number forty in traditional hymns such as "Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days" is only an approximation.

Are Sundays excluded from Lent?

No. The definition of what days are included in Lent is given above, in *General Norms* 28. No exception is made for Sundays. Indeed, the *General Norms* go on to specifically name the Sundays of the period as belonging to the season: "The Sundays of this season are called the First, Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent. The Sixth Sunday, which marks the beginning of Holy Week, is called Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday)" (*General Norms* 30).

Some people customarily allow themselves on Sunday to have things they have voluntarily given up for Lent, but since these forms of self-denial were voluntarily assumed anyway, a person is not under an obligation to practice them on Sunday (or any other specific day of the week).

Why is the season called Lent?

Lent is the Old English word for *spring*. In almost all other languages, Lent's name is a derivative of the Latin term *quadragesima* or "the forty days."

Why is Lent approximately forty days long?

In the Bible, forty days is a traditional number of discipline, devotion, and preparation. Moses stayed on the mountain of God forty days (Ex. 24:18, 34:28). The spies were in the land forty days (Num. 13:25). Elijah traveled forty days before he reached the cave where he had his vision (1 Kgs. 19:8). Nineveh was given forty days to repent (Jonah 3:4). And, most significantly for our Lenten observance, Jesus spent forty days in wilderness praying and fasting prior to undertaking his ministry (Matt. 4:2). Thus it is fitting for Christians to imitate him with a forty-day period of prayer and fasting to prepare to celebrate the climax of Christ's ministry, Good Friday (the day of the crucifixion) and Easter Sunday (the day of the Resurrection).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "'For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sinning' [Heb. 4:15]. By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert" (CCC 540).

What are fast and abstinence?

Under current canon law in the Western rite of the Church, a day of fast is one on which Catholics who are eighteen to sixty years old are required to keep a limited fast. In this country you may eat a single, normal meal and have two snacks so long as these snacks do not add up to a second meal. Children are not required to fast, but their parents must ensure they are properly educated in the spiritual practice of fasting. A day of abstinence is a day on which Catholics fourteen years and older are required to abstain from eating meat. (Though under the current discipline of the Western rite of the Church, fish, eggs, milk products, and foods made using animal fat are permitted, they are not in the Eastern rites.) Their pastor can easily dispense those with medical conditions from the requirements of fast and/or abstinence.

Is there a biblical basis for abstaining from meat as a sign of repentance?

Yes. The book of Daniel states, "In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia . . . 'I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over'" (Dan. 10:1-3).

Isn't abstaining from meat one of the "doctrines of demons" Paul warned about in 1 Timothy 4:1-5?

When Paul warned of those who "forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods," he had in mind people with the Manichean belief that sex is wrong and certain foods like meat are immoral. (Thus the spiritual ideal for many modern New Agers is a celibate vegetarian, as in the Eastern religions.)

We know that Paul has in mind those who teach sex and certain foods are intrinsically immoral because he tells us that these are "foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:3b-5).

Sex and all kinds of food are good things-which is why the Catholic Church has marriage for a sacrament and heartily recommends the practice eating to its members. This is why it is fitting for these things to be given up as part of a spiritual discipline. Thus Daniel gave up meat (as well as wine, another symbol of rejoicing), and Paul endorses the practice of temporary celibacy to engage in a special spiritual discipline of increased prayer (1 Cor. 7:5). By denying ourselves these good things we encourage an attitude of humility, free

ourselves from dependence on them, cultivate the spiritual discipline of sacrifice, and remind ourselves of the importance of spiritual goods over earthly goods.

In fact, if there was an important enough purpose, Paul recommended permanently giving up marriage and meat. Thus he himself was celibate (1 Cor. 7:8). He recommended the same for ministers (2 Tim. 2:3-4) and for the unmarried in order to devote themselves more fully to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:32-34), unless doing so would subject them to great temptations (1 Cor. 7:9). Similarly, he recommended giving up meat permanently if it would prevent others from sinning (1 Cor. 8:13).

Since the Catholic Church requires abstinence from meat only on a temporary basis, it clearly does not regard meat is immoral. Instead, it regards it as the giving up of a good thing in order to attain a spiritual goal.

What authority does the Church have to establish days of fast and abstinence?

The authority of Jesus Christ. Jesus told the leaders of his Church, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt.16:19, 18:18). The language of binding and loosing was (in part) a rabinnic way of referring to the ability to establish binding *halakah* or rules of conduct for the faith community. (See the *Jewish Encyclopedia*: "Binding and loosing (Hebrew, *asar ve-hittir*) . . . Rabinnical term for 'forbidding and permitting.'")It is especially appropriate that the references to binding and loosing occur in Matthew, the "Jewish Gospel."

The *Jewish Encyclopedia* continues: "The power of binding and loosing was always claimed by the Pharisees. Under Queen Alexandra, the Pharisees, says Josephus (*Wars of the Jews* 1:5:2), 'became the administrators of all public affairs so as to be empowered to banish and readmit whom they pleased, as well as to loose and to bind.' . . . The various schools had the power 'to bind and to loose'; that is, to forbid and to permit (Talmud: Chagigah 3b); and they could also bind any day by declaring it a fast day (Talmud: Ta'anit 12a). . . . This power and authority, vested in the rabbinical body of each age of the Sanhedrin, received its ratification and final sanction from the celestial court of justice (Sifra, Emor, 9; Talmud: Makkot 23b).

"In this sense Jesus, when appointing his disciples to be his successors, used the familiar formula (Matt. 16:19, 8:18). By these words he virtually invested them with the same authority as that which he found belonging to the scribes and Pharisees who 'bind heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but will not move them with one of their fingers'; that is 'loose them,' as they have the power to do (Matt. 23:2-4). In the same sense, [in] the second epistle of Clement to James II (*Clementine Homilies,* Introduction

[A.D. 221]) Peter is represented as having appointed Clement as his successor, saying: 'I communicate to him the power of binding and loosing so that, with respect to everything which he shall ordain in the earth, it shall be decreed in the heavens; for he shall bind what ought to be bound and loose what ought to be loosed as knowing the rule of the Church'" (*Jewish Encyclopedia* 3:215).

Thus Jesus invested the leaders of this Church with the power of making *halakah* for the Christian community. This includes the setting of fast days (like Ash Wednesday).

To approach the issue from another angle, every family has the authority to establish particular family devotions for its members. If the parents decide that the family will engage in a particular devotion at a particular time (say, Bible reading after supper), it is a sin for the children to disobey and skip the devotion for no good reason. In the same way, the Church as the family of God has the authority to establish its own family devotion, and it is a sin for the members of the Church to disobey and skip the devotions for no good reason. Of course, if the person has a good reason the Church dispenses him.

In addition to Ash Wednesday, are any other days during Lent days of fast or abstinence?

Yes. All Fridays during Lent are days of abstinence. Also, Good Friday, the day on which Christ was crucified, is day of both fast and abstinence.

All days in Lent are appropriate for fasting or abstaining, but canon law does not require it. Such fasting or abstinence is voluntary.

Why are Fridays during Lent days of abstinence?

Because Jesus died for our sins on Friday, making it an especially appropriate day of mourning our sins by denying ourselves something we enjoy. (By the same token, Sunday—the day on which he rose for our salvation—is an especially appropriate day to rejoice.)

Are acts of repentance appropriate on other days during Lent?

Yes. The Code of Canon Law states, "All Fridays through the year and the time of Lent are penitential days and time throughout the universal Church" (CIC 1250).

Why are acts of repentance appropriate at this time of year?

Because it is the time leading up to the commemoration of our Lord's death for our sins and the commemoration of his resurrection for our salvation. It is thus especially appropriate to mourn the sins for which he died. Humans have an innate psychological need to mourn tragedies, and our sins are tragedies of the greatest sort.

What are appropriate activities for ordinary days during Lent?

Giving up something we enjoy, engaging in physical or spiritual acts of mercy for others, prayer, fasting, abstinence, going to confession, and other acts expressing repentance in general.

Is the custom of giving up something for Lent mandatory?

No. However, it is a salutary custom, and parents or guardians may choose to require it, since the spiritual training of their children is their prime responsibility.

Why is giving up something for Lent such a salutary custom?

By denying ourselves something we enjoy, we discipline our wills so that we are not slaves to our pleasures. Just as over-indulging in the pleasure of eating leads to physical flabbiness, over-indulging in pleasure in general leads to spiritual flabbiness. When the demands of morality require us to sacrifice something pleasurable (such as sex outside marriage) or endure hardship (such as being scorned for the faith), spiritual flabbiness may well make us fail.

Is the denying of pleasure an end in itself?

No, it is only a means to an end. By training ourselves to resist temptations when they are not sinful we train ourselves to reject temptations when they *are* sinful. We also express our sorrow over having failed to resist sinful temptations in the past. There are few better ways to keep our priorities straight than by denying ourselves things of lesser priority to show us that they are not necessary and focus our attention on what is necessary.

Can we deny ourselves too many pleasures?

Definitely. God made human life contingent on certain goods, such as food, and to refuse to enjoy enough of them has harmful consequences. For example, if we do not eat enough food we can damage our bodies (and, in the extreme, even die). Just as there is a balance between eating too much food and not eating enough food, there is a balance involved in other goods.

If we deny ourselves too much, it may deprive us of goods God gave us in order that we might praise him or decrease our effectiveness in ministering to others. It can also constitute the sin of ingratitude by refusing to enjoy the things God wanted us to have because he loves us. If a child refused every gift his parent gave him, it would displease the parent; if we refuse gifts God has given us, it displeases God because he loves us and wants us to have them.

Aside from Ash Wednesday, what are the principal events of Lent?

There are a variety of saints' days that fall during Lent, and some of these change from year to year, since the dates of Lent itself change based on when Easter falls. However, the Sundays during the Lenten season commemorate special events in the life of our Lord, such as his Transfiguration and his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, which begins Holy Week. Holy Week climaxes with Holy Thursday, on which Christ celebrated the first Mass; Good Friday, on which he was crucified; and Holy Saturday-the last day of Lent-during which our Lord lay in the tomb before his Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Why Self-Denial Is Part of Lent

Fr. Carlos Martins

I once gave a talk on Lenten fasting and mortification at a gathering of Catholic professionals. One of the attendees came up to me afterward, slightly annoyed, and said that fasting and mortification were not part of her spirituality. "I can follow Jesus perfectly well without them," she said. "I focus instead on doing good." (Ironically, that day was a Friday during Lent, and she had purchased fancy cupcakes for everyone.)

I responded with a question. "Then what did Jesus mean when he said, 'Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself' (Matt. 16:24)?"

In recent years, there has been a strong current among many Catholics to take on Lenten "self-giving" penances rather than to engage in those that are more explicitly acts of self-denial. Thus, rather than give up things such as sweets, coffee, eating animal flesh (even on Fridays), or some other good thing, there is an exhortation to do such things as to pray an extra chaplet, to visit a shut-in, to devote more time to spiritual reading, or some other such activity.

Prayer and works of mercy are both wonderful and necessary Lenten practices. However, if we do not practice self-denial, then we miss the point of Lent.

Two principles are relevant here. First, Jesus remains our model and exemplar. You can bet that Our Lord engaged in much prayer and intercession during his forty days in the desert. But he did so while engaging in rigorous and meaningful self-denial. Scripture states that Jesus fasted while in the desert (Luke 4:2). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, "By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert" (540). The Church has been fasting for 2,000 years. The legitimacy and moral authority of fasting, therefore, speaks for itself.

Second, in neglecting to fast we could be inadvertently *feeding the beast*. One of the effects of the fall is an inordinate love of self. We often think too highly of ourselves. We allow our appetites to run amok. One of the purposes of the season of Lent is to attack this inordinate love of self.

Indeed, fantasizing about being more than what they were is how Adam and Eve were tricked by the devil into rejecting God. "'You will not certainly die,' the serpent said to the woman. 'For God knows that when you eat from the tree your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God'" (Gen. 3:4-5). It is worth noting that when the devil plied this temptation, Adam and Eve had not yet fallen. In other words, human nature was still as God had made it: intact and unbroken. It was by luring them to inordinate self-love that the devil got them to agree to his sordid plan. We've been paying the price ever since.

Our brokenness is a force to be reckoned with. It can easily bring us down into all sorts of dysfunction and sin. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul gives a strong exhortation to attack that broken self, what he calls our *old self*: "You should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth" (Eph. 4:22-24). Paul identifies our old self as the source of our sinfulness, our disordered passions, our refusal to follow the Lord and, ultimately, our unhappiness. To allow it to exist is foolishness. We must declare war on it instead.

We put our old self to death by *mortification*. Mortification comes from two Latin words, *mortem* and *facere*; together they mean "to bring about death." It consists of the practice of measured denial of our lower appetites and desire for sensual pleasure. To mortify ourselves brings liberation. Indeed, the *Catechism* calls self-denial one of "the preconditions of all true freedom" (2223).

One of the most basic and traditional forms of observing Lent is fasting: mandatory for all Catholics (except for those exempted by age or illness) on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and encouraged throughout the season. It has the weight not just of ancient Christian practice behind it but that of all major religions. Even the ancient philosophers practiced fasting. Plato, for example, fasted in order to achieve greater physical and mental efficiency.

Some people can fast quite rigorously. Others have more difficulty. For them, some creativity may be necessary.

I had a friend with a very low body weight. For him to miss a meal, or not to consume his regular amount of food, meant virtual non-functionality. He couldn't do his job, he couldn't concentrate, he couldn't engage in conversation. This is certainly not what the

Church desires when it prescribes fasting. Thus, rather than cutting down on the amount of food he ate (which was already only the amount he needed to function), he deprived himself of the things that made food enjoyable. He refused himself all condiments. Salt, pepper, hot sauce, ketchup, butter, and the like, were emptied from his house prior to Lent.

Do you find it burdensome to fast? Try eating your hamburger without ketchup, mustard, cheese, and the other condiments you enjoy putting on it. Do not salt your fries. Do you need a cup of coffee to be alert and to function? Forego the cream and sweetener. In all these practices you'll feel the deprivation, and you will live an authentic Lent. In fact, depriving ourselves of condiments is a great way to fast, since although they add pleasure to our eating experience, they possess virtually no nutritional value. For forty days, why not put them to death?

To be clear, practicing penance is not an end in itself. The Church does not prescribe penance because it is sadistic; it prescribes it for two essential realities it brings about. The first is that it reminds us of our own mortality. The displeasure that comes with fasting makes us *feel* our lack of self-sufficiency and our dependence on God. It makes our prayer that much more real and genuine because it is prayer made with both the body and the mind. That prayer, in turn, may fuel acts of charity.

The second is that a meaningful, sincere, and authentic Lenten observance makes Easter that much more of a celebration. When Lent is over it is time for glory, and we consume the good things we have gone without. And it is good to do so. They are a reminder of the glory that Christ has purchased for us and that awaits us in the next life.

Indeed, Scripture describes heaven as a banquet (Matt. 22:2), as a wedding feast (Matt. 25: 10), as a place devoid of hunger (Rev. 7:16). Although it is true that the Church takes seriously the observance of fasting, it is equally true that no one appreciates a feast like the Church. For 2,000 years she has been preparing for one. "Blessed is the one who will dine in the kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15).

May God bless us all in our Lenten observances.

The Countdown to Lent

Michelle Arnold

Before the changes to the liturgy in the late 1960s, the Church in the West had a pre-Lenten season before the start of Lent that was known as Shrovetide. It included three Sundays of preparation for Lent known as Septuagesima ("seventieth"), Sexagesima ("sixtieth"), and Quinquagesima ("fiftieth"). There was also Quadragesima ("fortieth") Sunday, the first Sunday in Lent.

There is much speculation as to how the days got their numerical names. One possibility is that they were a more or less literal countdown of the days before Easter (bracketing out Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays during Lent from fasting). Another possibility is that there were mystical connections, such as the "seventy" of Septuagesima representing the Babylonian Captivity. What is clear was that this was a time when the Church geared up to celebrate Lent—something of a spiritual countdown.

Carnival

In generations past, this was a time in many Catholic countries when Carnival was celebrated as a sort of final round of winter merrymaking before the Lenten season began. An inquirer once said to me, "I've always wondered why the pope does not denounce this event. The sins that occur at these celebrations worldwide boggle the mind."

Indeed, celebrations of Carnival around the world, including Mardi Gras in the southern U.S. (New Orleans being the most infamous), are notorious for unchaste and intemperate flamboyance. So how did it become popular in Catholic cultures in past generations, and why does it remain popular when the Church no longer celebrates Shrovetide liturgically in the same way it once did?

The purpose of the partying was to celebrate Christ's birth and to prepare for Lent by using up foods that were forbidden during Lent by earlier Church abstinence disciplines.

In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with Carnival and no reason for the pope to condemn it. As we learned from societies in which Puritans took power, simply because sins happen at parties is no reason to ban parties. What is needed is the evangelization of culture so that people understand it's possible to have fun while not sinning.

In sixteenth-century Italy, around the end of the Renaissance, St. Philip Neri (1515-1595) was mortified by the sinfulness of the Carnival celebrations in Rome. Rather than preach against Carnival, he organized alternative celebrations that combined pious devotions and the reception of the sacraments (particularly confession) with joyful pilgrimages to the various Roman churches. He was so successful that he became known as the Apostle of Rome (quite an accolade in the city in which the Christian foundations were laid by the apostles Peter and Paul).

Like St. Philip, we should strive not to stamp out fun but to transform it into holy joy. Because, as he said, "A joyful heart is more easily made perfect than a downcast one."

Shrovetide

Eventually, though, parties must end. As Prince Harry observed in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, "If all the year were playing holidays, to sport would be as tedious as to work." But to shift from the festive atmosphere of Shrovetide to the more somber observance of Lent can be jarring. Perhaps this is where the wisdom of the Church's one-time liturgical observance of pre-Lent was helpful.

And perhaps we can recapture a bit of that preparation for Lent in our personal devotions. Here are some of the ways Catholics used to prepare for Lent that we can incorporate into our lives today:

Sacramental confession. The word *shrove* comes from the word *shrive* and refers to confession. To be "shriven" means to have been sacramentally absolved from one's sins. Many parishes offer Lenten penance services, but it has been an ancient custom for Christians to go to confession before Lent. Cleansing your conscience beforehand is not only good for you, it might reduce the lines waiting for confession during the Lenten season.

Spiritual reading. The readings for the Sundays leading up to Lent centered on the fall of man, the loss of original innocence, and man's descent into grave sin. These days, we might make these readings from the first chapters of Genesis part of our personal devotional reading. If you pray the rosary, you might choose to focus on the sorrowful

mysteries. Those with a devotion to the Divine Mercy might choose to bookend Lent and Easter with a Divine Mercy novena during pre-Lent and then from Easter through Divine Mercy Sunday.

Preparing for fast and abstinence. In times past, Christians consumed their meat and dairy products during pre-Lent in preparation for Lenten abstinence from these foods. The English custom of calling the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday "Pancake Tuesday" sprang from a day devoted to eating pancakes to use up the last of the eggs and butter. The day was made more festive with foot races in which matrons would race each other while flipping flapjacks. (Legend says the custom got its start when an English housewife raced to church while flipping the pancake she had been frying when the church bells rang.)

The Church in the West no longer requires Catholics to abstain from dairy and meat products except for abstinence from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and the Lenten Fridays. Still, many observe the pious custom of giving up for Lent a personal pleasure such as sweets, coffee, or some other rich food. Pre-Lent would be a good time to plan what you will give up during Lent and to prepare in other ways for the start of the season.

Self-examination. In March 2000, St. John Paul II prepared the Christian world for the start of the third millennium by leading the Church in an examination of its collective conscience. Whether or not you choose to go to confession during pre-Lent or Lent, the former might be a good time to do a more rigorous personal examination of conscience than you ordinarily do so as to prepare for Lent and Easter. Perusing a good *examen*, perhaps with the help of a spiritual director, might complement whatever spring cleaning of your home you do during this time.

In 2010, Benedict XVI stated, "Each year, on the occasion of Lent, the Church invites us to a sincere review of our life in light of the teachings of the gospel." As we prepare for Lent this year, and every year, may we find time for that self-reflection to which Christ's vicars have called us.

Lent Unplugged

Christopher Check

Ready for Lent?

Not me. I'm never ready for Lent. In fact, I'm never ready for the great feasts the holy seasons usher in.
I keep expecting to be overwhelmed with euphoric joy at Easter or Christmas, but every year, I know I should have fasted more, given more, prayed more—to say nothing of worked more diligently, listened more attentively, and held my tongue more frequently.

Thanks be to God, the Church gives us penitential seasons every year. Ever before us is an opportunity to renew our effort to be a little less of this world and a little more of the next.

And this age in which we live is especially problematic. More than a century ago, Bl. John Henry Cardinal Newman declared that all people in all times have tended to think that that the age in which they live is an age apart, an age unusual for its wickedness. But he added that the modern age—our age—is beset by something new: unbelief. St. Paul could point to the pagan temple of the unknown god in Athens because the Greeks believed in something.

Unbelief is the best explanation for the crisis in which the Catholic Church finds herself mired today, whether it is prelates abusing their offices in the most vile and degrading ways or churchgoing, married Catholics deliberately frustrating their fertility with chemicals. We are no better than the pagans, some will say; but the truth is that the pagans making their way in the darkness before the Incarnation at least understood that children were a positive good. They wanted their lines to continue.

Ours is an age of such self-loathing that we do not want to reproduce. How easy it is to draw the line from the contraceptive mentality to the ever more disturbing revelations about men in high office in the Church, whether active, complicit, or silent.

I spoke last fall at a parish in Texas about the crisis in the Church. I told the good parishioners what I have just told you concerning my thoughts about the origins of the crisis. But I also proposed, in addition to prayer and fasting, a course of action: unplug from the online gossip.

Stay informed as need be, but don't let a perpetual diet of crisis distract you from your interior life. Pick up a practice that our chaplain, Fr. Hugh Barbour, has brought to Catholic Answers: lauds and vespers. The staff here uses the Mundelein Psalter.

And that brings me back to Lent—give a little more Divine Office and a little less screen a go this Lent, and see how you feel on Easter Sunday.

Into the Desert

Michelle Arnold

Last year, on the first Sunday of Lent I attended Mass at the local Carmelite monastery rather than at my parish church, so this past Sunday was the first time I had seen my parish church transformed for Lent. As I looked about the sanctuary, I sighed.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal states:

During Lent it is forbidden for the altar to be decorated with flowers. Exceptions, however, are Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent), solemnities, and feasts (GIRM 305).

Per the GIRM, there were no flowers on the altar. In years past, this parish has taken this dictum so far as to forbid parishioners to place flowers at the base of statues placed at various points around the church. What was in the altar area was what made me sigh: clay pots stuffed with purple cloths and dead branches. I suppose I should be thankful that the holy water fonts still had water in them, instead of being replaced with sand, as is known to occur at some Catholic parishes during Lent.

While an argument could be made that the dead branches and other desert-like accoutrements were intended to invoke the penitential experience of Lent—and indeed, to be fair, there is nothing necessarily wrong with the evocation of a desert in Lent—I think the liturgical fad of strewing sand, tumbleweeds, and dead branches in church sanctuaries misunderstands what a desert is and why it is a metaphor for Lent.

Deserts are geographical regions that have a moisture deficit. They lose more moisture than they receive. But that does not mean that the plant life there is dead. In fact, many of the flowers and plants in deserts are known for storing water or for having deep roots that

tap into underground water supplies. Water loss is prevented through thick waxy coats on the leaves. There also tends to be a high salt content in deserts.

In the Christian spiritual life, water is a symbol for grace. It is the matter for baptism, which washes us clean of original sin. The spiritual masters, such as St. Teresa of Avila, often use water as a metaphor for the action of grace in the soul. As for salt, in the ancient world it was used both for preserving food and for seasoning it. When Christ calls upon Christians to be the salt of the earth (cf. Matt. 5:13), he is calling upon his followers to both preserve what he gives them and to make it appetizing for a starving world.

If we apply these themes to Lent, then decorating sanctuaries with dead plants and replacing the water with sand is precisely the opposite of what we are to experience in Lent. Rather than do without grace, we are supposed to soak it up—through prayer, abstinence, sacrifices, sacramentals, the sacraments (especially confession)—to store it in abundance for the leaner times to come. Rather than do without flowers, we are supposed to be what blooms in Lent, tapping into the supplies of grace the Church provides for spiritual survival. While the Church asks that altars not be decorated with flowers during Lent, I think it is a mistake for parishes to forbid parishioners to bring flowers as offerings to be placed at the bases of church statues. It would be especially nice to encourage that the flowers and plants brought be the succulents that grow in deserts.

But we do not soak up grace in order to hoard it. It is meant not just for us, but also for the world. And so, like the salt that preserves and seasons, we focus during Lent on preserving Christian truth and passing it on to future generations.

Lent is not a season of spiritual death or spiritual aridity. It is a time to access the various means of grace Christ gives us through his Church so that we might live and bloom for God.

"When You Fast"

Jimmy Akin

When I was a young Protestant and much opposed to any form of penance ("Hey, Jesus forgave our sins! Why do we need to do penance?"), my Episcopalian aunt pointed my attention to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says: "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt. 6:16–18; cf. Mark 2:18–20).

My aunt stressed that Jesus said "*when* you fast" not "*if* you fast." He *expected* his followers to fast, so it is no surprise that we find them doing so: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:2–3; cf. 14:23). The question is not "*Should* Christians fast?" but "*Why* should Christians fast—what are we trying to accomplish by it?"

As a Protestant I heard that one should fast so he can spend in prayer the time he otherwise would spend eating. It's easy to see why a Protestant would choose this explanation (it strips fasting of any penitential connotation), but it doesn't work.

One can pray *while* eating, or one can eat quickly and spend the rest of the allotted meal time praying. To get still more time for prayer, one could make other cuts in the day's schedule—cuts that produce less discomfort than does fasting. Either of these options—eating quickly or cutting other parts of one's schedule—avoid the hunger pains that fasting produces.

If the goal were merely to get more time for prayer, avoiding hunger would be important. The average person does not pray well if he is ravenously hungry. By dinner time, having skipped breakfast and lunch, he will be distracted by hunger. That could cause him to pray *less* effectively than if he had eaten and then devoted himself to prayer.

An alternative justification for fasting is that it purifies one physically. While fasting may have beneficial physical effects, such as removing toxins from the body, this cannot be the underlying explanation for the Christian practice. To get significant physical effects from fasting, one would have to do precisely the right amount of it. A one-day fast does little for one's body, and a prolonged fast will harm it, and the Bible gives no regulations about *how long* one should fast. More fundamentally, Jesus does not ask us to fast so that we can benefit *physically*. He is not recommending it as a diet or health-improvement technique. He intends it to do something *spiritual*.

Fasting (and embracing the hunger that it produces) improves us spiritually in several ways: We express our recognition that spiritual things are more important than physical things. We learn to deny ourselves pleasures, even in spite of pain—an important spiritual lesson. We declare that we recognize the need to reform and to get closer to God. We willingly embrace the hunger fasting produces as a sign of being willing to shoulder the burdens of others (cf. Col. 1:24). Finally, we express humility before God by adopting a humble posture, recognizing our dependence on him and affirming our submissiveness to his will.

This posture of humility is linked with fasting in Scripture. The scribe Ezra tells us, "Then I proclaimed a fast . . . that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a straight way for ourselves, our children, and all our goods" (Ezra 8:21). These spiritual effects—and the consequently more effective prayer life that greater spirituality brings (Jas. 5:16b)—are the reason Jesus not only approves of fasting, but expects his followers to fast.

Fasting *does* relate to prayer and is used in the Bible as a way of petitioning God. But the humility one expresses in fasting must be real and not affected. God castigates those who fast but do not truly repent: "[O]n the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high" (Is. 58:3b-4).