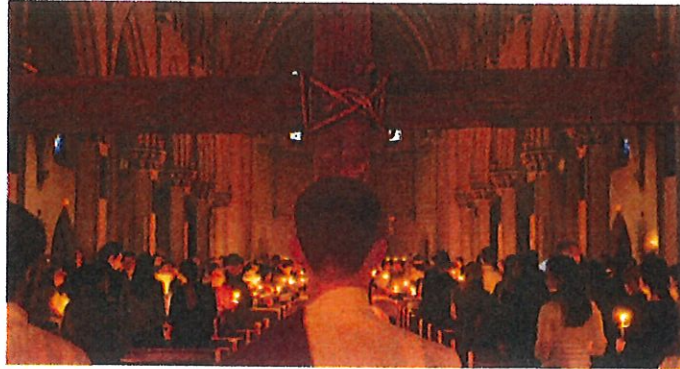


Don't Waste Your Lent: 7 Ways to Have a Good Lent

SAM GUZMAN



Lent is a season of penance and ascetical warfare. The enemy is concupiscence, the world, and the devil. The goal is pure hearts so that we can joyfully celebrate the resurrection of our Lord at Easter, the greatest feast of the liturgical year. In a way, Lent should be a microcosm of our entire struggle on earth, just as the Paschal feast of Easter is a microcosm of our heavenly triumph in Christ. Yet, a good Lent takes focus and discipline, and it can easily be wasted.

In my own experience, I often begin the Lenten season with the best of intentions. I imagine myself going into full ascetic mode, fasting and praying as ardently as one of the monastic fathers in the desert. And *maybe* for the first week I succeed through sheer strength of will. Then, just when I am feeling good about myself, everything falls apart and I come face to face with my own weakness. We've all been there at some point, and so today I'd like to share 7 practical ways to have a good Lent.

1. Have a plan – The fastest way to ruin Lent is to have good intentions but no plan. Be specific. “I’m going to pray more,” isn’t good enough. Once you’ve determined what you are going to do, stick to it every single day. One word of advice: Make it doable. Often, we are overly ambitious and commit to way too much. When we fail in our Lenten goals, we grow discouraged and give up completely. This is a victory for the devil. Make your commitments modest and practical, and your Lent will be the better for it.

2. Read a good book – The saints are constantly exhorting us to read good spiritual books, and there is no better time to begin this practice than during Lent. Reading Scripture or the writings of the saints is a great place to start. Here are some suggestions for Lenten reading:

- *Meditations for Lent* by Jacques-Benigne Bossuet
- *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis
- *Divine Intimacy* by Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene
- *Humility of Heart* by Fr. Cajetan Mary da Bergamo
- *True Devotion to Mary* by St. Louis de Montfort
- *The Spiritual Combat* by Dom Lorenzo Scupoli
- *A Lenten Journey with Jesus and St. Paul of the Cross* by Fr. Victor Hoaglund
- *Happy Are You Poor* by Fr. Thomas Dubay
- *Letter to Friends of the Cross* by St. Louis de Montfort
- *Love of Eternal Wisdom* by St. Louis de Montfort
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3. Examine yourself – Lent is an excellent time to take an inventory of the state of your soul. What are your predominant faults? Do you have any hidden idols in your life? What is keeping you from following the will of God with all your heart? Use a thorough examination of conscience to help you assess your spiritual health. Remember, Lent is not ultimately about giving up sweets or other things we enjoy, it is first and

foremost about repentance, which means giving up up sin and returning to God, our loving Father. While taking inventory of your sins may be painful, it is a healthy pain that restores the soul.

4. Confess your sins – After examining your conscience, the logical next step is to go to confession. Normally, it can be hard to find a parish with confession readily available (thirty minutes on a Saturday isn't enough!), but the good news is, many parishes have increased confession times during Lent, so it's a great time to go. Before receiving the sacrament of penance, though, remember the five requirements for a good confession: 1) Examination of conscience 2) True contrition for having offended God 3) Firm resolution to sin no more 4) Clear confession (don't hold any sins back) 5) Penance for the sins you have committed

5. Pray – Let's face it, we can all pray more, and Lent is a great time to plan and implement a daily prayer rule that can guide you the rest of the year. During this season, however, we should especially focus our prayers on repentance and contrition for our sins. Here are some suggestions for Lenten prayer.

- [The Prayer of Manasseh](#)
- [The Seven Penitential Psalms](#)
- [The Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary](#)
- [The Stations of the Cross](#)
- [The Divine Mercy Chaplet](#)
- [Prayer before a Crucifix](#)

6. Fast – I've written before about the importance of prayer and fasting, so suffice it to say that it is something we should be doing all year round, not just during Lent. Still, Lent is a very good time to refocus our efforts and renew our commitment. We should especially focus on fasting from things related to our predominant sins. Are you addicted to Instagram or Facebook? Fast from them. Maybe you're binge watching shows on Netflix. Give it up. On the other hand, maybe you're addicted to criticizing others. Make a special effort to fast from negative speech. The point is, while fasting from certain foods is an excellent ascetical practice, we do not have to limit our Lenten fasting to things we eat. Remember the words of Jesus: "If your eye offend you, pluck it out." Nothing should stand between us and the heavenly kingdom, and we should be intentional about cutting off those things that are causing us to sin.

7. Give alms – During Lent, we especially remember the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. This is the greatest act of generosity in history, for Jesus died not just for his friends, but for his enemies. "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). The generosity of God in Christ should impel us to be generous and merciful to others, especially those poor and in need. This Lent, find a way to give, whether it is supporting a religious order or helping at a homeless shelter. Remember the promise of Jesus, "And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."

You Cannot Fail

I began this post by talking about my own failure, and yet, when it comes to lenten disciplines, true failure is not really possible. I mean that even failing in our commitments can help us grow in humility and knowledge of our own spiritual poverty—and growth in these is always spiritual advancement.

This Lent do your best. Strive to root out sin and cultivate holiness. But when you fail, realize that even those who can be considered righteous fall seven times daily (Prov. 24:16). Let it be a lesson in humility that drives you back to the grace of God flowing from the pierced heart of Jesus—for that is the true heart of Lent.

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